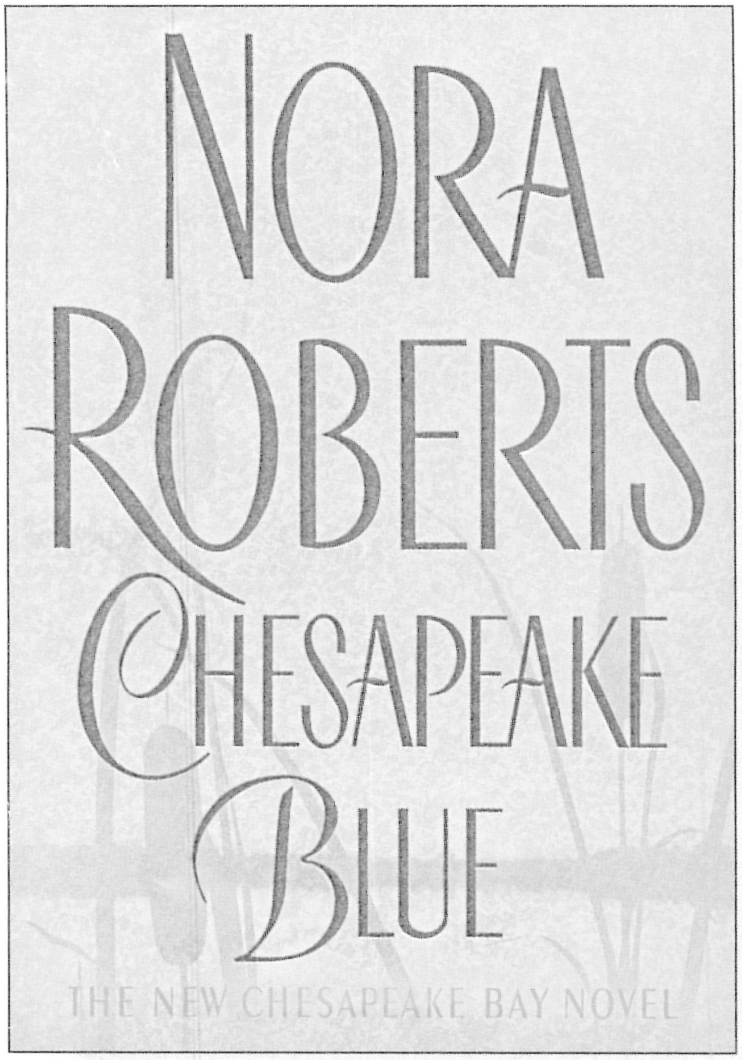
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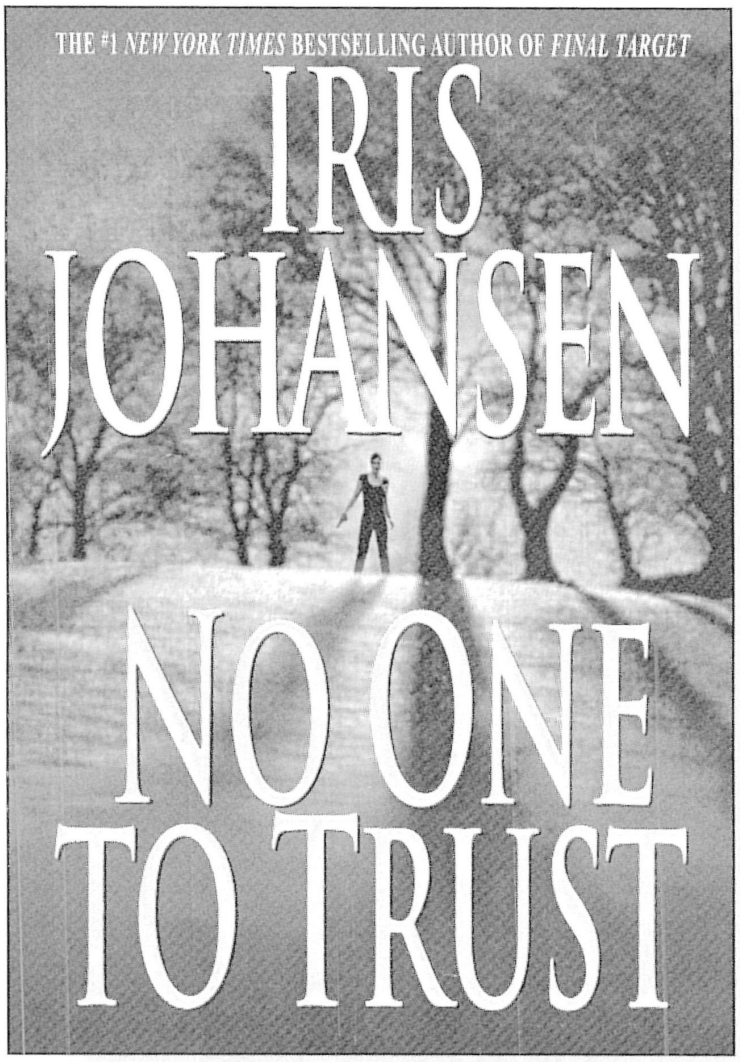
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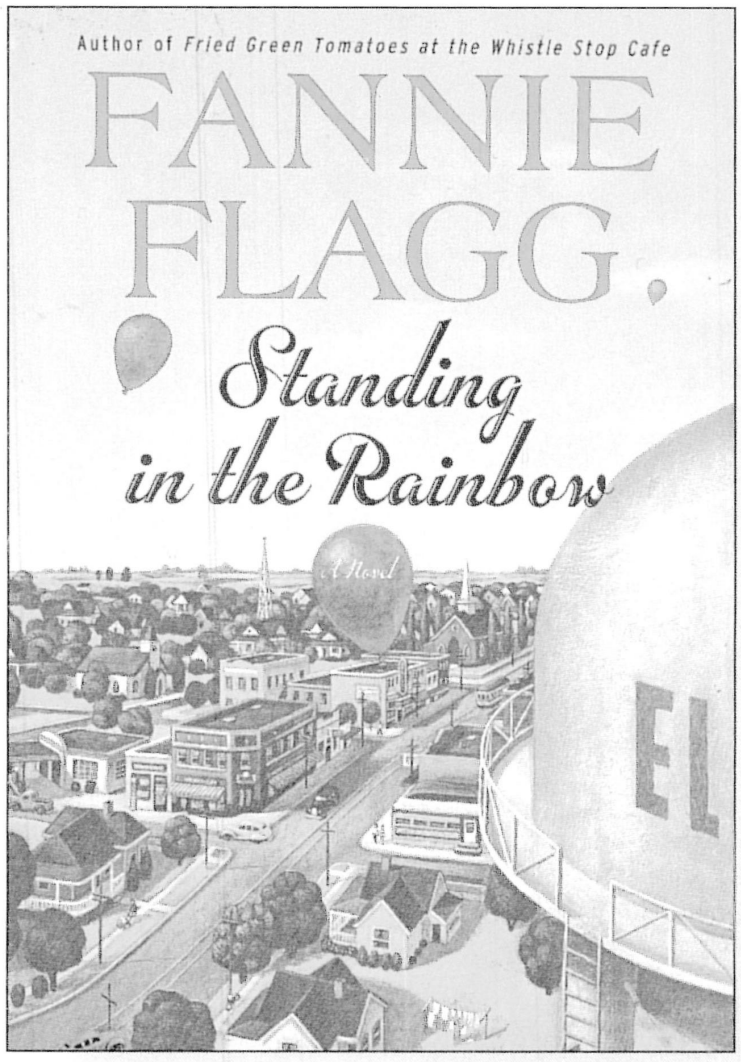
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FANNIE
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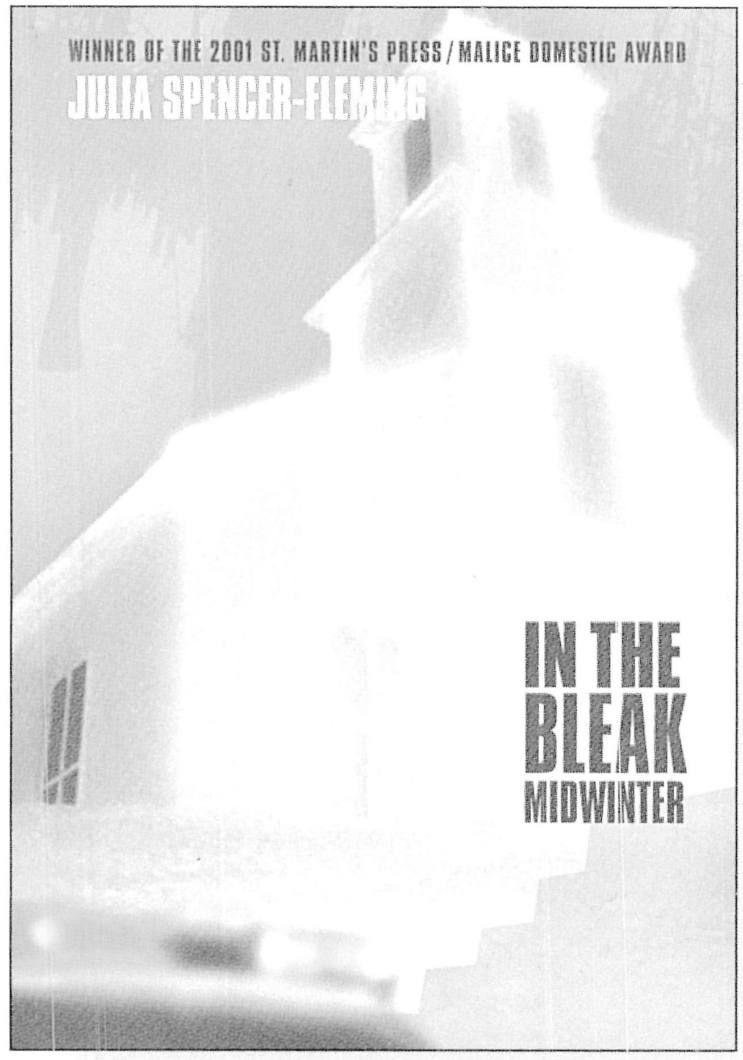
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JULIA SPENCER-FLEMING
IN THE
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FROM THE DESK
OF THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Dear Reader,

I still remember the day when I received a condensed book featuring *Eye of the Needle*, a first novel by the then unknown author Ken Follett. I loved this World War II spy novel and have always been grateful to Reader's Digest for introducing me to one of my favorite writers.

Today we at Select Editions still pride ourselves on discovering and publishing books by tomorrow's best authors. Each year our editors read more than 2000 early manuscripts sent to us by the country's top publishers. Some, written by big-name authors, are destined to become bestsellers. But most are written by relative unknowns and arrive at our offices with little fanfare or acclaim.

I'm excited to share with you our latest find, *In the Bleak Midwinter* by Julia Spencer-Fleming, which begins on page 436. When I first read this stunning debut mystery, I was so entranced by the world the author created that I didn't want the book to end. I know you'll be as absorbed by this story as I was. Join me in celebrating the launch of an exciting new author—and watch her career as it takes flight!

Very truly yours,

Laura E. Kelly

Editor-in-Chief
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P.S. We have a treat in store for Ken Follett spy-thriller fans. Keep an eye on your mailbox. . . .

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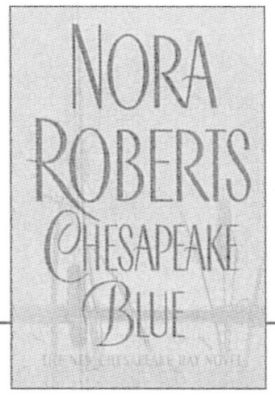

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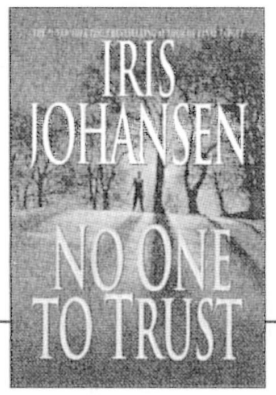

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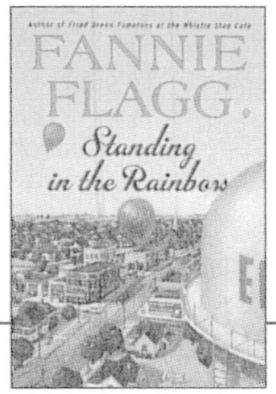

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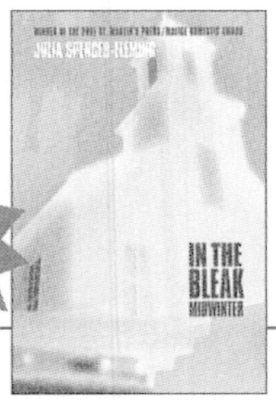


EXCITING NEW AUTHOR!

IN THE BLEAK MIDWINTER *436*
Julia Spencer-Fleming

The only art that really matters

is art for the heart's sake.

NORA ROBERTS

CHESAPEAKE BLUE

THE NEW CHESAPEAKE BAY NOVEL

One

HE was coming home.

Maryland's Eastern Shore was a world of marshes and mudflats, of wide fields with row crops straight as soldiers. It was flatland rivers with sharp shoulders, and secret tidal creeks where the heron fed. It was blue crab and the bay, and the watermen who harvested them.

No matter where he'd lived—in the first miserable decade of his life or in the last few years as he approached the end of his third decade—only the Shore had ever meant home.

There were countless aspects, countless memories of that home, and every one was as bright and brilliant in his mind as the sun that sparkled off the water of the Chesapeake.

As he drove across the bridge, his artist's eye wanted to capture that moment—the rich blue water and the boats that skimmed its surface, the white waves and the swoop of greedy gulls. The way the land skimmed its edge and spilled back with its browns and greens. All the thickening leaves of gum and oak trees, with those flashes of color that were flowers basking in the warmth of spring.

He wanted to remember this moment just as he remembered the first time he'd crossed the bay to the Eastern Shore, a surly, frightened boy beside a man who'd promised him a life.

He'd sat in the passenger seat of the car with the man he hardly knew at the wheel. He had the clothes on his back and a few meager possessions in a paper sack.

His stomach had been tight with nerves, but he'd fixed a bored look on his face and stared out the window.

If he was with the old guy, he wasn't with *her.* That was as good a deal as he could get. Besides, the old guy was pretty cool.

He didn't stink of booze or of the mints that some of the creeps Gloria brought to the dump they were living in used to cover it up. And the couple of times they'd been together, the old guy, Ray, had bought him a burger or pizza. And he'd talked to him.

Adults, in his experience, didn't talk to kids. At them, around them, over them. But not *to* them.

Ray did. Listened, too. And when he'd asked if Seth wanted to live with him, he'd felt like maybe, just maybe, he was catching a break.

Away from her. That was the best part. The longer they drove, the farther away from her.

If things got sticky, he could run. The guy was really old. Big, but old. All that white hair and that wide, wrinkled face. Seth took quick, sidelong glances at it, began to draw the face in his mind.

His eyes were really blue, and that was kind of weird because so were his own. He sure looked tired now.

"Almost home," Ray said, approaching the bridge. "Hungry?"

"I dunno. Yeah, I guess."

"My experience, boys are always hungry. Raised three bottomless pits."

There was cheer in the big voice, but it was forced. The child might have been barely ten, but he knew the tone of falsehood.

"How come you're taking me to your place?"

"Because you need a place."

"Get real. People don't do stuff like that."

"Some do. Stella and I, my wife, we did stuff like that."

"You tell her you're bringing me around?"

Ray smiled, but there was a sadness in it. "In my way. She died some time back. You'd've liked her."

He didn't know what to say about that. "What am I supposed to do when we get where we're going?"

"Live," Ray told him. "Be a boy. Go to school, get in trouble. I'll teach you to sail."

"On a boat?"

Now Ray laughed, a big booming sound that filled the car and, for reasons the boy couldn't understand, untied the nerves in his belly. "Yeah, on a boat. Got a brainless puppy—I always get the brainless ones—I'm trying to housebreak. You can help me with that. You're gonna have chores. We'll lay down the rules, and you'll follow them. Don't think because I'm an old man I'm a pushover."

"You gave her money."

Ray glanced away from the road briefly and looked into eyes the same color as his own. "That's right. That's what she understands, from what I can see. She never understood you, did she, boy?"

"If you get pissed off at me or tired of having me around or just change your mind, you'll send me back. I won't go back."

They were over the bridge now, and Ray pulled the car to the shoulder of the road, shifted his bulk in the seat so they were face to face. "I'll get pissed off at you, and at my age I'm bound to get tired from time to time. But I'm making you a promise here and now. I'm giving you my word. I won't send you back."

"If she—"

"I won't let her take you back," Ray said, anticipating him. "No matter what I have to do. You're my family now, and you'll stay with me as long as that's what you want. When a Quinn makes a promise," he added, and held out a hand, "he keeps it."

Seth looked at the offered hand, and his own sprang damp. "I don't like being touched."

Ray nodded. "Okay. But you've still got my word on it." He pulled onto the road again. "Almost home," he said again.

Within months Ray Quinn had died, but he'd kept his word. He'd kept it through the three men he'd made his sons. Those men had given the scrawny, suspicious, and scarred young boy a life.

They had given him a home and made him a man.

Cameron, the edgy, quick-tempered gypsy; Ethan, the patient, steady waterman; Phillip, the elegant, sharp-minded executive. They had stood for him, fought for him. They had saved him.

His brothers.

THE gilded light of the late afternoon sun sheened the marsh grass, the mudflats, the flat fields of row crops. With the windows down he caught the scent of water as he bypassed the little town of St. Christopher.

He'd considered swinging into town, heading first to the old brick boatyard. Boats by Quinn still built custom-made wooden boats, and in the eighteen years since the enterprise had started, it had earned its reputation for quality and craftsmanship.

They were probably there, even now. Cam cursing as he finished up some fancywork in a cabin. Ethan quietly lapping boards. Phil, up in the office, conjuring up some snazzy ad campaign.

He could go by Crawford's, pick up a six-pack. Maybe they'd have a cold one, or more likely Cam would toss him a hammer and tell him to get his ass back to work.

He'd enjoy that, but it wasn't what was drawing him now. It wasn't what was pulling him down the narrow country road where the marsh still crept out of the shadows and the trees with their gnarled trunks spread leaves glossy with May.

Of all the places he'd seen—the great domes and spires of Florence, the florid beauty of Paris, the stunning green hills of Ireland—nothing ever caught at his throat, filled up his heart, like the old white house with its soft and faded blue trim that sat on a bumpy lawn that slid back into quiet water.

He pulled in the drive behind the old white 'vette that had been Ray and Stella Quinn's. The car looked as pristine as the day it had rolled off the showroom floor. Cam's doing, he thought. Cam would say it was a matter of showing proper respect for an exceptional machine. But it was all about Ray and Stella, all about family. All about love.

The lilac in the front yard was smothered with blooms. That was

a matter of love, too, he reflected. He'd given Anna the little bush for Mother's Day when he was twelve. She'd cried, he remembered. Big, beautiful brown eyes flooded with tears, laughing and swiping at them the whole time he and Cam planted it for her.

She was Cam's wife, and so that made Anna his sister. But inside, he thought now, where it counted, she was his mother.

He got out of the car, into the lovely stillness. He was no longer a scrawny boy with oversize feet and a suspicious eye. He'd grown into those feet. He was six one, with a wiry build. His hair had darkened and was more a bronzed brown than the sandy mop of his youth. Running a hand through it now, he recalled his intention to have it trimmed before leaving Rome. The guys were going to rag on him about the little ponytail, which meant he'd have to keep it for a while out of principle.

He shrugged and, dipping his hands into the pockets of his worn jeans, began to walk, scanning the surroundings. Anna's flowers, the rockers on the front porch, the woods that haunted the side of the house and where he'd run wild as a boy. The old dock swaying over the water, and the white sailing sloop moored to it.

He stood looking out, his face, hollow-cheeked and tanned, turned toward the water. His lips, firm and full, began to curve. The weight he hadn't realized was hanging from his heart began to lift.

Out of the trees shot a black bullet. "Witless!" The dog skidded to a halt, all flopping ears and lolling tongue as it studied the man.

"Come on, it hasn't been that long." He crouched, held out a hand. "Remember me?"

Witless grinned the dopey grin that had named him, instantly flopped down, and rolled to expose his belly for a rub.

"There you go. That's the way."

There had always been a dog for this house. Always a boat at the dock, a rocker on the porch, and a dog in the yard.

"Yeah, you remember me." As he stroked Witless, he looked over to the far end of the yard where Anna had planted a hydrangea over the grave of his own dog. The loyal and much loved Foolish.

"I'm Seth," he murmured. "I've been away too long."

He caught the sound of an engine, the sassy squeal of tires. Even as he straightened, the dog leaped up, streaked away toward the front of the house.

Wanting to savor the moment, Seth followed more slowly. He listened to the car door slam, then to the lift and lilt of her voice as she spoke to the dog.

Then he just looked at her, Anna Spinelli Quinn, with the curling mass of dark hair windblown from the drive, her arms full of the bags she'd hefted out of the car. His grin spread as she tried to ward off the desperate affection from the dog.

"How many times do we have to go over this one, simple rule?" she demanded. "You do not jump on people, especially me. Especially me when I'm wearing a suit."

"Great suit," Seth called out. "Better legs."

Her head whipped up, and the deep brown eyes widened and showed him the shock, the pleasure, the welcome all in one glance.

"Oh, my God!" Heedless of the contents, she tossed the bags through the open car door. And ran.

He caught her, lifted her six inches off the ground, and spun her around before setting her on her feet again.

"Seth. Seth." She clung, ignoring the dog that leaped and yipped and did his best to shove his muzzle between them. "I can't believe it. You're here."

"Don't cry."

"Just a little. I have to look at you." She had his face framed in her hands as she eased back. So handsome, she thought. So grown-up. She brushed a hand at his hair. Tears still trickled even as she grinned. "Very bohemian. You look wonderful."

"You're the most beautiful woman in the world."

She shook her head. "When did you get here? I thought you were in Rome."

"I was. I wanted to be here."

"If you'd called, we would've met you."

"I wanted to surprise you." He walked to the car to pull the bags out for her. "Cam at the boatyard?"

"Should be. Here, I'll get those."

"Where's Kevin and Jake?"

She started up the walk with him, glanced at her watch as she thought about her sons. "What day is this?"

"Thursday."

"Kevin has rehearsal, school play, and Jake's got softball practice. Kevin's got his driver's license, God help us, and is scooping up his brother on his way home." She unlocked the front door.

It was the same, Seth thought. It didn't matter what color the walls were painted, if the old sofa had been replaced, or if a new lamp stood on the table. It was the same because it *felt* the same.

"I want you to sit down"—she nodded to the kitchen table, under which Witless was now sprawled—"and tell me everything. You want some wine?"

"Sure, after I help you put this stuff away." When her eyebrows shot up, he paused with a gallon of milk in his hand. "What?"

"I was just remembering the way everyone, including you, disappeared whenever it was time to put groceries away."

"Because you always said we put things in the wrong place."

"You did, on purpose, so I'd kick you out of the kitchen."

"You copped to that, huh?"

"I cop to everything when it comes to my guys. Nothing gets by me, pal. Did something happen in Rome?"

"No." He continued to unpack the bags. He knew where everything went in Anna's kitchen. "I'm not in trouble, Anna."

But you are troubled, she thought, and let it go for now. "I'm going to open a nice Italian white. We'll have a glass, and you can tell me all the wonderful things you've been doing."

He shut the refrigerator and turned to her. "I'm sorry I didn't get home for Christmas."

"Honey, we understood. You had a showing in January. We're all so proud of you, Seth. Cam must've bought a hundred copies of the issue of the *Smithsonian* magazine when they did the article on you. The young American artist who's seduced Europe."

He shrugged a shoulder, such an innately Quinn gesture, and she grinned. "So sit," she ordered.

"I'll sit, but I'd rather you caught me up."

"All right." She finished opening the bottle, got out two glasses. "I'm doing more administrative work these days than casework. Social work involves a lot of paperwork, but it's not as satisfying. Between that and having two teenagers in the house, there's no time to be bored. The boat business is thriving."

She passed Seth his glass. "Aubrey's working there."

"No kidding?" The thought of the girl who was more sister to him than any blood kin made him smile. "How's she doing?"

"Terrific. She's beautiful, smart, stubborn, and, according to Cam, a genius with wood. I think Grace was a little disappointed when Aubrey didn't want to pursue dancing, but it's hard to argue when you see your child so happy. And Grace and Ethan's Emily followed in her mother's toe shoes."

"She still heading to New York end of August?"

"A chance to dance with the American Ballet Company doesn't come along every day. And Deke's his father's son—quiet, clever, and happiest when he's out on the water. Do you want a snack?"

"No." He reached out, laid a hand over hers. "Keep going."

"Okay, then. Phillip remains the business's marketing and promotion guru. I don't think any of us, including Phil, ever thought he'd leave the ad firm in Baltimore, give up urban living, and dig down in St. Chris. But it's been, what, fourteen years, so I don't suppose we can call it a whim. Of course he and Sybill keep the apartment in New York. She's working on a new book."

"Yeah. I talked to her." He rubbed the dog's head with his foot. "How are the kids?"

"Insane, as any self-respecting teenager should be. Bram was madly in love with a girl named Cloe last week. That could be over by now. Fiona's interests are torn between boys and shopping. But well, she's fourteen, so that's natural."

"Fourteen! She hadn't had her tenth birthday when I left for Europe. It doesn't seem possible that Kevin's driving and Aub's

building boats. Bram's sniffing after girls. I remember—" He cut himself off, shook his head.

"What?"

"I remember when Grace was pregnant with Emily. It seems like five minutes ago, and now Emily's going to New York. How can eighteen years go by, Anna, and you not look any older?"

"Oh, I've missed you." She laughed and squeezed his hand.

"I've missed you, too. All of you."

"We'll fix that. We'll round everybody up and have a big, noisy Quinn welcome home on Sunday. How does that sound?"

"About as perfect as it gets."

The dog yipped, then scrambled out from under the table to run toward the front door.

"Cameron," Anna said. "Go on out and meet him."

He walked through the house, as he had so often. Opened the screen door, as he had so often. And looked at the man standing on the front lawn, playing tug-of-war with the dog over a hunk of rope.

He was still tall, still built like a sprinter. There were glints of silver in his hair now. He had the sleeves of his work shirt rolled up to the elbows, and his jeans were white at the stress points. He wore sunglasses and badly beaten Nikes.

At fifty Cameron Quinn still looked like a badass.

In lieu of greeting, Seth let the screen door slam behind him. Cameron glanced over. A thousand words passed between them without a sound. A million feelings and countless memories. Saying nothing, Seth came down the steps as Cameron crossed the lawn. Then they stood face to face.

"I hope that piece of junk in the driveway's a rental," Cameron began.

"Yeah, it is. Best I could do on short notice. Figured I'd turn it in tomorrow, then use the 'vette for a while."

Cameron's smile was sharp as a blade. "In your dreams, pal."

Cam gave Seth an affectionate punch on the arm and then dragged him into a fierce hug. "Why the hell didn't you let us know you were coming home?"

"It was sort of spur of the moment," Seth began. "I wanted to be here. I just needed to be here."

"Okay. Anna burning up the phone lines letting everybody know we're serving fatted calf?"

"Probably. She said we'd have the calf on Sunday."

"That'll work. You settled in yet?"

"No. I got stuff in the car."

"Let's get your gear."

"Cam"—Seth reached out, touched Cam's arm—"I want to come home. Not just for a few days. Can I stay?"

Cam drew off his sunglasses, and his eyes, smoke gray, met Seth's. "What the hell's the matter with you that you think you have to ask? You trying to piss me off?"

"I never had to try. Nobody does with you. Anyway, I'll pull my weight."

"You always pulled your weight. And we missed seeing your ugly face around here."

And that, Seth thought as they walked to the car, was all the welcome he needed from Cameron Quinn.

THEY'D kept his room. The bed was the same one he'd slept in, dreamed in, waked in. He tossed his suitcase carelessly on the bed and laid his battered paint kit—one Sybill had given him for his eleventh birthday—on the worktable Ethan had built.

He'd need to find studio space, he thought. As long as the weather held, he could work outdoors. But he'd need somewhere to store his canvases, his equipment. Maybe there was room in the old barn of the boatyard, but that wouldn't suit on a permanent basis. And he meant to make this permanent.

He'd had enough of traveling for now. He'd needed to go, to stand on his own. He'd needed to learn. And he'd needed to paint.

So he'd studied in Florence and worked in Paris. He'd wandered the hills of Ireland and Scotland. He'd lived cheap. When there'd been a choice between buying a meal or paint, he'd gone hungry.

He'd been hungry before. It had done him good, he hoped, to remember what it was like not to have someone making sure you were fed and safe and warm.

He laid out his sketch pad, put away his charcoal, his pencils. The walls of his room held some of his early drawings. Cam had taught him how to make the frames on an old miter box at the boatyard. Seth took one from the wall to study it. It showed promise, he thought, in the rough, undisciplined lines.

But more, much more, it showed the promise of a life.

He'd caught them well enough, he decided. Cam, with his thumbs tucked in his pockets, stance confrontational. Then Phillip, slick, edging toward an elegance that nearly disguised the street smarts. Ethan, patient, steady as a redwood in his work clothes.

He'd drawn himself with them. Seth at ten, he thought. Thin, narrow shoulders and big feet, with a lift to his chin to mask something more painful than fear. Something that was hope.

A life moment, Seth thought now, captured with a graphite pencil. Drawing it, he'd begun to believe—in-the-gut believe—that he was one of them. A Quinn.

"You mess with one Quinn," he murmured as he hung the drawing on the wall again, "you mess with them all."

Two

"RISE and shine, pal. This ain't no flophouse."

The voice, and the gleeful sadism behind it, had Seth groaning. He flopped onto his stomach, dragged the pillow over his head. "Go away. Go far far away."

"If you think you're going to spend your days around here sleeping till the crack of noon, think again."

Seth opened one eye, rolled it until he focused on the bedside clock. It wasn't yet seven. He turned his face back into the mattress.

Cam ripped the sheets away, snagged Seth's ankles, and dragged him to the floor.

Seth glared up at his persecutor. "What the hell's with you? This is my room, my bed, and I'm trying to sleep in it."

"Put some clothes on. I've got something for you to do out back," Cam told him as he strode from the room. "Five minutes."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." Some things never changed, Seth thought as he yanked on jeans, then dragged a sweatshirt over his head and stalked from the room.

"Mom, I can't find my shoes!"

Seth glanced toward Jake's room as he headed for the stairs.

"They're down here," Anna called back. "In the middle of my kitchen floor, where they don't belong."

"Not *those* shoes. The *other* shoes."

Such familiar family dynamics would have made Seth smile—if it hadn't been shy of seven a.m.

"What the hell's up with Cam?" he demanded of Anna as he stalked into the kitchen. "Is there any coffee? Why does everybody wake up yelling around here?"

"Cam needs to see you outside. Yes, there's a half pot left, and everyone wakes up yelling because it's how we like to greet the day. Go outside, Seth, or you'll spoil Cam's sunny mood."

Seth walked out the kitchen door, a cup of coffee in his hand.

There they were, almost as Seth had drawn them so many years before. Cam, thumbs in pockets; Phillip, slicked up in a suit; Ethan, with a faded gimme cap over his windblown hair.

Seth swallowed coffee and the heart that had lodged in his throat. "This is what you dragged me out of bed for?"

"Same smart mouth." Phillip caught him in a hug. His eyes, nearly the same tawny gold as his hair, skimmed over Seth's ragged shirt and jeans. "Didn't I teach you anything?" With a shake of his head he fingered the dull gray sleeve. "Italy was obviously wasted on you."

"They're just clothes, Phil. You put them on so you don't get cold or arrested."

With a pained wince Phillip stepped back. "Where did I go wrong?"

"Looks okay to me," Ethan said. "Still a little scrawny. What's this?" He tugged on Seth's hair. "Long as a girl's."

"He had it in a pretty little ponytail last night," Cam told him. "He looked real sweet."

"We'll get you a nice pink ribbon," Ethan said with a chuckle, and grabbed Seth in a bear hug.

Phillip nipped the mug out of Seth's hand, took a sip. "We figured we'd come by and get a look at you before Sunday."

"It's good to see you." Seth glanced at Cam. "You could've said everyone was here instead of dumping me out of bed."

"More fun that way." Cam rocked back on his heels. "Well."

"Well," Phillip agreed, and set the mug on the porch rail.

"Well." Ethan gave Seth's hair another tug, then gripped his arm.

"What?"

Cam only grinned, and locked a hold on Seth's other arm. Seth didn't need the gleam in their eyes to understand.

"Come on. You're kidding, right?"

"It's got to be done." Before Seth could begin to struggle, Phillip scooped his legs out from under him. "It's not like you've got to worry about getting that snazzy outfit wet."

"Cut it out." Seth bucked, tried to kick as he was carried off the porch. "I mean it. That water's damn cold."

"Probably sink like a stone," Ethan said mildly as they muscled Seth toward the dock.

He fought against their hold, fought not to laugh. "Takes three of you to take me out. Bunch of feeble old men," he snarled. With grips, he thought, like steel.

That had Phillip's brow quirking. "How far do you think we can throw him?"

"Let's find out. One," Cam announced as they stood swinging him between them on the dock.

"I'll kill you." Swearing, laughing, Seth wiggled like a fish.

"Two," Phillip said with a grin. "Better save your breath, kid."

"Three. Welcome home, Seth," Ethan said as the three of them hurled him in the air.

He was right. The water was freezing. It stole the breath he hadn't bothered to save, chilled him right down to the bone. When he surfaced, shoving at his hair, he heard his brothers howling with delight, saw them ranged together on the dock with the early sun showering down and the old white house behind them.

I'm Seth Quinn, he thought. And I'm home.

THE early morning dip went a long way toward purging any jet lag. Since he was up, Seth decided he might as well get things done. He drove back to Baltimore, turned in the rental, and after some wheeling and dealing at a dealership drove toward the Shore, the proud owner of a silver Jaguar convertible.

Selling his art was a two-edged sword. It sliced at his heart each time he parted with a painting. But he was selling very well and might as well reap some of the benefits. His brothers, he thought smugly, were going to be green when they got a load of his new ride.

He cut back on his speed as he cruised into St. Chris. The little water town with its busy docks and quiet streets was another painting to him, one he'd re-created countless times.

Market Street, with its shops and restaurants, ran parallel to the dock where crab pickers still set up tables on weekends to perform for the tourists. The town spread back with its old Victorian houses, its saltboxes and clapboards shaded by leafy trees.

Seth passed Crawford's and thought of sloppy submarine sandwiches, dripping ice-cream cones, and town gossip.

He'd ridden his bike on these streets, racing with Danny and Will McLean. He'd cruised with them in the secondhand Chevy he and Cam had fixed up the summer he turned sixteen.

He eased into a parking space so he could walk down to the dock. He wanted to study the light, the shadows, the colors and shapes, and was already wishing he'd thought to bring a sketch pad.

It amazed him constantly how much beauty there was in the world. How it changed and it shifted even as he watched. The way

the sun struck the water at one exact instant, how it spread or winked away behind a cloud. Or there, he thought, the curve of that little girl's cheek when she lifted her face to look at a gull. The way her laugh shaped her mouth or the way her fingers threaded through her mother's in absolute trust. There was power in that.

He stood watching a white boat heel to in blue water, its sails snap full as they caught the wind. He wanted to be out on the water again, he realized. Maybe he'd shanghai Aubrey for a few hours.

He started back for his car. A sign painted on a storefront caught his attention: BUD AND BLOOM, he read. Flower shop. That was new. He strolled closer, noting the festive pots hanging on either side of the glass. The window itself was filled with plants and what he thought of as whatnots. Clever ones, though, Seth thought, finding himself amused by the spotted black-and-white cow with pansies flowing over its back. In the lower-right-hand corner of the window was written DRUSILLA WHITCOMB BANKS, PROPRIETOR.

It wasn't a name he recognized, and since the painted script informed him the shop had been established in September of the previous year, he imagined some fussy widow on the elderly side. White hair, he decided, starched dress with a prim floral print to go with sensible shoes and the half-glasses she wore on a gold chain around her neck.

She and her husband had come to St. Chris for long weekends, and when he'd died, she'd had too much money and time on her hands. So she'd moved here and opened her little flower shop so that she could be somewhere they'd been carefree together while doing something she'd secretly longed to do for years.

The storyline made him like Mrs. Whitcomb Banks and her snobby cat—she'd *have* to have a cat—named Ernestine.

He decided to make her, and the many women in his life, happy. With flowers on his mind, Seth opened the door to the musical tinkle of bells.

The proprietor, he thought, had an artistic eye. The flowers were her paint. She had daubed, splashed, and streamed them very well. Flows of colors, a mix of shapes, a contrast of textures covered the

canvas of her shop. It was tidy, as he'd expected, but not regimented.

And the whimsy again, he noted, charmed. Cast-iron pigs, flute-playing frogs, wicked-faced gargoyles. There were pots and vases, ribbons and lace, shallow dishes of herbs and thriving houseplants. He got the impression of cannily arranged clutter in a limited and well-used space. Nice going, Mrs. Whitcomb Banks, he decided, and prepared to spend lavishly.

The woman who stepped out of the rear door behind the long service counter wasn't Seth's image of the talented widow, but she sure as hell belonged in a fanciful garden. He gave his widow extra points for hiring help who brought faeries and spellbound princesses to a man's mind.

"May I help you?"

"Oh, yeah." Seth crossed to the counter and just looked at her.

Long, slim, and tidy as a rose, he thought. Her hair was true black, cut close to follow the lovely shape of her head while leaving the elegant stem of her neck exposed. It was a look, he thought, that took considerable female guts and self-confidence.

It left her face completely unframed so that the delicate ivory of her skin formed a perfect oval canvas. The gods had been in a fine mood the day they'd created her, and had drawn her a pair of long almond-shaped eyes of moss green, then added a nimbus of amber around her pupils.

Her nose was small and straight, her mouth wide to go with the eyes and very full. She'd tinted it a deep, seductive rose.

Her chin had the faintest cleft, as if her maker had given it a light finger brush of approval.

He would paint that face; there was no question about it. And the rest of her as well. He saw her lying on a bed of red rose petals, those faerie eyes glowing with sleepy power, those lips slightly curved, as if she'd just wakened from dreaming of a lover.

Her smile didn't waver as he studied her, but the dark wings of her eyebrows lifted. "And just what can I help you with?"

The voice was good. Strong and smooth. Not a local, he decided.

"We can start with flowers," he told her. "It's a great shop."

"Thanks. What sort of flowers did you have in mind today?"

"We'll get to that." He leaned on the counter. "Have you worked here long?"

"From the beginning. If you're thinking ahead to Mother's Day, I have some lovely—"

"No, I've got Mother's Day handled. You're not from around here. The accent," he explained. "A little north, maybe."

"Very good. D.C."

"So the name of the shop—Bud and Bloom. Is that from Whistler?"

Surprise flickered over her face. "As a matter of fact, it is. You're the first to tag it. 'The masterpiece should appear as the flower to the painter—perfect in its bud as in its bloom.' "

"I probably recognized it because that's what I do. I paint."

"Really?" She reminded herself to be patient, to relax into the rhythm. Part of the package in the little town was slow, winding conversations with strangers. She'd already sized him up. His face was vaguely familiar, and his eyes, a very striking blue, were frank and direct in their interest. She wouldn't stoop to flirtation, certainly not to make a sale, but she could be friendly.

She'd come to St. Chris to be friendly. Because she imagined he painted houses, she sorted through her mind for an arrangement that would suit his budget. "Do you work locally?"

"I do now. I've been away. Do you work here alone?" He glanced around. "Does the proprietor come in?"

"I work alone for now. And I am the proprietor."

He looked back at her and began to laugh. "Boy, I wasn't even close. Nice to meet you, Drusilla Whitcomb Banks." He held out a hand. "I'm Seth Quinn."

Seth Quinn. She laid her hand in his automatically and did her own rapid readjustment. Not a face she'd seen around town, she realized, but one she'd seen in a magazine. No housepainter, despite the old jeans and faded shirt, but an artist. The local boy who'd become the toast of Europe.

"I admire your work," she told him.

"Thanks. I admire yours. And I'm probably keeping you from it. I'm going to make it worth your while. I've got some ladies to impress. You can help me out."

"Ladies? Plural?"

"Yeah. Three—no, four," he corrected, thinking of Aubrey. "Cut flowers in a nice box. Let me think." He calculated route and time and decided he'd drop by to see Sybill first. "Number one is sophisticated, chic, intellectual, and practical-minded, with a soft, gooey center. Roses, I guess."

"If you want to be predictable."

He looked back at Dru. "Let's be unpredictable."

"Just a moment. I have something in the back you should like."

Something out here I like, he thought as she turned toward the rear door. He gave his heart a little pat.

Phillip, Seth thought as he wandered the shop, would approve of the classic, clean lines of that ripening peach-colored suit she wore. Ethan, he imagined, would wonder how to give her a hand with all the work that must go into running the place. And Cam . . . well, Cam would take one long look at her and grin.

She came back carrying an armload of streamlined and exotic flowers with waxy blooms the color of eggplant.

"Calla lilies," she told him. "Elegant, simple, classy, and, in this color, spectacular."

"You nailed her."

She set them in a cone-shaped holding vase. "Next?"

"Warm, old-fashioned in the best possible way." Just thinking of Grace made him smile. "Simple in the same way. Sweet but not sappy, and with a spine of steel."

"Tulips," she said, and walked to a glass refrigerated cabinet. "In this rather tender pink. A quiet flower that's sturdier than it looks."

"Bingo. You're good."

"Yes, I am." She was enjoying herself now—not just for the sale but for the game of it. "Number three?"

Aubrey, he thought. How to describe Aubrey. "Young, fresh, fun. Tough and unstintingly loyal."

"Hold on." With the image in mind Dru breezed into the back again and came out with a clutch of sunflowers with faces as wide as a dessert plate.

"They're perfect. You're in the right business, Drusilla."

It was, she thought, the finest of compliments. "No point in being in the wrong one. And since you're about to break my record for single walk-in sales, it's Dru. And the fourth lucky woman?"

"Bold, beautiful, smart, and sexy. With a heart like . . ." Anna's heart, he thought. "With a heart beyond description. The most amazing woman I've ever known."

"And apparently you know quite a few. One minute." Again she went into the back and this time came back with Asiatic lilies in triumphant scarlet.

"Oh, man. They're so Anna." He reached out to touch one of the red petals. "So completely Anna. You've just made me a hero."

"Happy to oblige. I'll box them and tie ribbons on each that coordinate with the color of the flowers inside. Cards are included. You can pick what you like from the rack on the counter."

"I won't need cards." No wedding ring, he noted. He'd have painted her regardless, but if she'd been married, it would have put an end to the rest of his plans. "What flower are you?"

She flicked him a glance as she arranged the first flowers in a tissue-lined white box. "All of them. I like variety." She tied a deep purple ribbon around the first box. "As it appears you do."

"I hate to shatter the illusion that I've got a harem going here. Sisters," he said, gesturing toward the flowers. "Though the sunflowers are niece, cousin, sister. The exact relationship's a little murky."

"Um-hm."

"My brothers' wives," he explained. "And one of my brother's oldest daughters. I figured I should clear that up since I'm going to paint you."

"Are you?" She tied the second box with pink ribbon edged with white lace. "Are you really?"

He took out his credit card. "You're thinking I'm just looking to get you naked, and I wouldn't have any objection to that."

She drew gold ribbon from its loop. "Why would you?"

"Exactly. But why don't we start with your face? It's a good face. I really like the shape of your head."

For the first time her fingers fumbled a bit. With a half laugh she stopped and really looked at him. It was time to move the artistic Mr. Quinn along.

"I'm flattered you admire the shape of my head." She picked up his credit card. "And that someone of your talent and reputation would like to paint me. But the business keeps me very busy. What free time I do have I'm extremely selfish with."

"You close at six daily and don't open on Sundays."

She should've been annoyed, she thought, but instead she was intrigued. "You don't miss much, do you?" She slid the sales slip over for his signature.

"Every detail matters." After signing the receipt, he plucked out one of her gift cards, turned it over to the blank back. He drew a quick study of her face as the blossom of a long-stemmed flower, then added the phone number at home before he signed it. "In case you change your mind," he said.

She studied the card and smiled. "I could probably sell this on eBay for a tidy little sum."

"You've got too much class for that." He piled up the boxes, hefted them. "Thanks for the flowers."

"You're welcome." She came around the counter to open the door for him. "I hope your . . . sisters enjoy them."

"They will." He shot her a last look. "I'll be back."

"I'll be here." Tucking the sketch into her pocket, she closed the door.

IT HAD been great to see Sybill, to spend an hour alone with her, and to see the pleasure she got from arranging the flowers in a tall, clear vase. They were perfect for her, he concluded. Just as the house she and Phillip had bought and furnished—the massive old Victorian with all the stylized details—was perfect for her.

She'd changed her hairstyle over the years, but now it was back

to the way he liked it best, swinging sleek nearly to her shoulders with all the richness of color of a pricey mink coat. She wore a simple and crisp white shirt with pegged black trousers.

She was the mother of two active children, as well as being a trained sociologist and successful author. And looked, Seth thought, utterly serene. He had reason to know that serenity had been hard won. She'd grown up in the same household as his mother. Half sisters who were like opposite sides of a coin.

Since even the thought of Gloria DeLauter clenched his stomach muscles, Seth pushed it aside and concentrated on Sybill.

"When you, Phil, and the kids came over to Rome a few months ago, I didn't think the next time I'd see you would be here."

"I wanted you to come back." She poured them each a glass of iced tea. "Sometimes in the middle of whatever was going on, I'd stop and think, Something's missing. What's missing? Then, oh yes, Seth. Seth's missing. Silly."

"Sweet." He gave her hand a squeeze before picking up the glass she set down for him. "Thanks."

"Tell me everything," she demanded.

They talked of his work and hers. Of the children.

When he got up to leave, she wrapped her arms around him. "Thanks for the flowers. They're wonderful."

"Nice new shop on Market. The woman who owns it seems to know her stuff. Have you been in there?"

"Once or twice." Because she knew him very well, Sybill smiled. "She's very lovely, isn't she?"

"Who's that?" But when Sybill merely tipped her head, he grinned. "Caught me. Yeah, she's got some face. What do you know about her?"

"Nothing, really. She moved here last summer, I think, and had the store open by fall. I believe she's from the D.C. area. It seems to me my parents know some Whitcombs and some Bankses from around there. Might be relatives." She shrugged. "I can't say for certain. My parents and I don't communicate very often these days."

He touched her cheek. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. They have two spectacular grandchildren whom they largely ignore." As they've ignored you, she thought.

"Your mother's never forgiven you for standing up for me."

"Her loss." Sybill spoke very precisely as she caught his face in her hands. "My gain. And I didn't stand alone. No one ever does in this family."

She was right about that, Seth thought as he drove toward the boatyard. No Quinn stood alone.

Three

ONCE Dru had rung up the next sale and was alone in the shop again, she took the sketch out of her pocket.

Seth Quinn wanted to paint her. She had no desire to pose, to be scrutinized, to be immortalized. Even by such talented hands. But she was curious about the concept of it, just as she was curious about Seth Quinn.

The article she'd read had included some details on his personal life. She knew he'd come to the Eastern Shore as a child, taken in by Ray Quinn before Ray died in a car accident. The facts given were that Ray Quinn had been his grandfather, and on his death Seth had been raised by Quinn's three adopted sons. And their wives as they had come along. Sisters, he'd said, thinking of the flowers he'd bought. Perhaps they had been for the women he considered his sisters.

It hardly mattered to her.

She'd been more interested in what the article had said about his work and how his family had encouraged his early talent. It was a fortunate child, in Dru's opinion, who had a family who loved him enough to let him go—to let him discover, to fail or succeed on his own. And who apparently welcomed him back just as unselfishly.

Still, it was difficult to imagine the man the Italians had dubbed

il maestro giovane—the young master—settling down in St. Christopher to paint seascapes. Just as it was difficult for many of her acquaintances to imagine Drusilla Whitcomb Banks, young socialite, contentedly selling flowers in a small waterfront shop.

It didn't matter to her what people thought. She'd come here to get away from the demands and expectations, the sticky grip of family, and the unrelenting upheaval of being used as the fraying rope in the endless game of tug-of-war her parents played.

She'd come to St. Chris for peace, the peace that she'd yearned for most of her life. She was finding it.

Though her mother would be thrilled—perhaps, stubbornly, *because* her mother would be thrilled at the prospect of her daughter's capturing the interest of Seth Quinn, Dru had no intention of cultivating that interest. Neither the artistic interest nor the frankly sexual interest she'd seen in his eyes when he'd looked at her. Or, if she was being honest, the frankly sexual interest she'd felt for him.

The Quinns were, by all reports, a large, complex, and unwieldy family. God knew she'd had her fill of family.

A pity, she admitted, tapping the card on her palm before dropping it into a drawer. The young master was attractive, amusing, and appealing. And any man who took the time to buy flowers for his sisters and wanted to make sure each purchase suited the individual style of the recipient earned major points.

"Too bad for both of us," she murmured, and shut the drawer with a final little snap.

SETH was thinking of Dru as she was thinking of him. He never doubted she'd consent to pose. He had an entire arsenal of weapons to battle a model's reluctance. All he had to do was decide which one would work best on Drusilla.

Tapping his fingers on the wheel to the outlaw beat of Aerosmith that blasted out of his car stereo, Seth considered her. She was comfortable with her looks and didn't fluster when a man made it clear she attracted him.

She wasn't married, and instinct told him she wasn't attached. A

woman like Dru didn't relocate to tag along after a boyfriend or lover. She'd moved from Washington, started a business, and ran it solo because that's just the way she wanted it.

Seth pulled into the parking lot of the old brick barn the Quinns had bought. Initially they'd rented the massive building, one that had been a tobacco warehouse in the 1700s, a packinghouse in the 1800s, and a glorified storage shed for much of the 1900s. Then it had been a boatyard, transformed and outfitted by the brothers Quinn. For the last eight years it had belonged to them.

Seth looked at the roof as he climbed out of the car. He'd helped reshingle it, he remembered, and had nearly broken his neck doing it.

He walked to the front, stood with his hands on his hips studying the weathered sign, BOATS BY QUINN, and noted that another name had been added to the four that had been there since the beginning. Aubrey Quinn.

Even as he grinned, she shoved out the front door. She had a tool belt slung at her hips and an Orioles fielder's cap low over her forehead. Her hair, the color of burnt honey, was pulled through the back loop to swing at her back.

She let out a whoop as she charged him. She leaped, boosted herself with a bounce of her hands off his shoulders, and wrapped her legs around his waist. The bill of her cap rapped him in the forehead when she pressed her mouth to his in a long, smacking kiss.

She chained her arms around his neck. "Don't go away again. Don't you dare go away again."

"I can't. Too much happens around here when I'm gone. Tip back." He dipped her away far enough to study her face. At two she'd been a tiny princess to him. At twenty she was an athletic, appealing handful. "Jeez, you got pretty," he said.

"Yeah? You too."

"Why aren't you in college?"

"Don't start." She rolled her bright green eyes and hopped down. "I did two years, and I'd've been happier on a chain gang. This is what I want to do." She jerked a thumb toward the sign. "My name's up there to prove it."

"You always could wrap Ethan around your finger."

"Maybe. But I didn't have to. Dad got it, and after some initial fretting so did Mom. I was never the student you were, Seth, and you were never the boatbuilder I am."

"If you're going to insult me, I'm not giving you your present."

"Where is it? What is it?"

"It's in the car." He pointed toward the lot and had the satisfaction of seeing her mouth drop open.

"A Jag? Oh, baby." She darted over the stubble of lawn to the lot to run her fingers reverently over the shining silver hood. "Cam's going to cry when he sees this. Let me have the keys so I can test her. . . ." She trailed off as he got the long white box out of the trunk. She blinked at the box.

"You bought me flowers. Oh, let me see! What kind are they?" She pulled a work knife out of her belt, sliced the ribbon, then yanked up the lid. "Sunflowers. Look how happy they are."

"Reminded me of you."

"I really love you." She stared hard at the flowers. "I've been so mad at you for leaving." When her voice broke, he gave her an awkward pat on the shoulder. "I'm not going to cry." She turned to hug him again. "I really love the flowers."

"Good." He slapped a hand on the one that was trying to sneak into his pocket. "You're not getting the keys. I've got to take off anyway. I've got flowers for Grace. I want to swing by and see her on my way home."

"She's not home. This is Mom's afternoon for running errands; then she'll pick Deke up from school and drop him off for his piano lesson. I'll take them to her."

"Tell her I'll try to get by tomorrow; otherwise I'll see her Sunday."

Aubrey laid her flowers with her mother's in the cab of her truck. "Let's go get Cam and show off your car. I tell you, he's going to break down and sob like a baby. I can't wait."

"You've got a mean streak, Aub." Seth slung his arm around her shoulders. "I like that about you. Now, tell me what you know about the flower lady. Drusilla."

"Aha." Aubrey leered up at him as they walked toward the building. "So that's the way the garden grows."

"Might."

"Tell you what. Meet me at Shiney's after dinner. Say about eight. Buy me a drink, and I'll spill everything I know."

"You're underage."

"Yeah, like I've never sipped a beer before," she retorted. "And remember, I'll be legal in less than six months."

"Until then, when I'm buying, you drink Coke." He tipped down the bill of her cap, then dragged open the door to the noise of power tools.

CAM didn't break down and weep, but he had drooled a little, Seth mused as he parked in front of Shiney's Pub. He glanced at the pickup beside his car. One thing about Aubrey, she was always prompt.

He opened the door to Shiney's and felt yet one more homecoming. Another constant of St. Chris, he thought. Shiney's Pub would always look as if it needed to be hosed down, the waitresses would always be leggy, and it would offer the very worst live bands to be found in the entire state of Maryland.

Seth scanned the tables and bar for a little blonde in a fielder's cap. She was indeed at the bar, curvy in unrelieved black, her burnt-honey hair spiraling down her back as she carried on a heated conversation with a guy who looked like Joe College.

Mouth grim, getting poised for a confrontation, Seth headed over to show College Boy what happened when a guy hit on his sister.

"You're full of it." Aubrey's voice snapped like a whip. "The pitching rotation is solid; the infield's got good gloves. The bats are coming around. By the all-star game the Orioles will be playing better than five-hundred ball."

"They won't see five hundred all season," the guy shot back.

"Bet." Aubrey dug a twenty out of her pocket, slapped it on the bar. Seth sighed. She might've looked like a tasty morsel, but nobody nibbled on his Aubrey.

"Seth." Spotting him, Aubrey reached out, hooked his arm, and yanked him to the bar. "Sam Jacoby," she said with a nod toward the man sitting beside her.

"Heard a lot about you." Sam held out a hand and slid off the stool. "Take a seat. Gotta split. See you around, Aub."

"You're going to owe me twenty bucks in July," she called out, then shifted her attention to Seth. "Sam's a nice enough guy, except for the fatal flaw that encourages him to root for the Mariners."

"I thought he was hitting on you."

"Sam?" Aubrey gazed back toward the tables with a smug and female look in her eye. "Sure he was. I'm holding him in reserve. I'm sort of seeing Will McLean right now."

"Will?" Seth nearly choked. "Will McLean?" The idea of Aubrey and one of his boyhood pals together—that way—had Seth signaling the bartender. "I really need a beer. Rolling Rock."

"Not that we get to see each other that often," Aubrey continued. "He's an intern at St. Chris General. Rotations at the hospital are a bitch. But when we do manage the time, it's worth it."

"Shut up. He's too old for you."

"I've always gone for older men." Deliberately she pinched his cheek. "Plus there's only, like, five years' difference. Still, if you want to talk about my love life—"

"I don't." Seth reached for the bottle the bartender set in front of him, drank deep. "I really don't."

"Okay, enough about me, then. Let's talk about you. How many languages did you score in when you were plundering Europe?"

It wasn't a comfortable topic to explore with Aubrey. "I wasn't on a sexual marathon. I was working."

"Some chicks really fall for the artistic type. Maybe your flower lady's one of them and you'll get lucky."

"Just tell me what you know about her."

"Okay." She grabbed a bowl of pretzels off the bar and began to munch. "So, she first showed up about a year ago. Spent a week hanging around. Checking out retail space," she said with a nod. "I got that from Doug Motts. Remember Dougie—roly-poly little kid?"

"Vaguely."

"He's working at Shore Realtors now. According to Doug, she knew just what she was looking for and told them to contact her in D.C. when and if anything that came close opened up. So Doug poked around some, trying to dig up information on his prospective client. She'd told him she'd visited St. Chris a couple times when she was a kid, so that gave Doug his starting point."

"Ma Crawford," Seth said with a laugh.

"You got it. What Ma Crawford doesn't know ain't worth knowing. She recalled the Whitcomb Bankses. Name like that, who wouldn't? But they stuck out more because she remembered Mrs. W.B. from when *she* was a girl visiting here with her family. Her really seriously kick-your-butt-to-Tuesday rich family. Whitcomb Technologies. As in *Fortune* 500. As in Senator James P. Whitcomb, the gentleman from Maryland."

"Ah. *Those* Whitcombs."

"You bet. The Senator, who would be the flower lady's grandfather, had an affection for the Eastern Shore. And his daughter, the current Mrs. W.B., married Proctor Banks of Banks and Shelby Communication. We're talking mega-dough with this combo."

"And young, nubile, and extremely wealthy Drusilla rents a storefront in St. Chris and sells flowers."

"Buys a building in St. Chris," Aubrey corrected. "A few months after Doug had the good fortune to be manning the desk at Shore Realtors when she walked in, that place went on the market. Doug, smelling commission, gives the young W.B. a call to tell her a rental just opened up on Market, and she makes him salivate when she asks if the owners are interested in selling. When they were, a deal was struck. Then she makes him the happiest man in St. Chris when she tells him to find her a house, too. She comes down, takes a liking to this ramshackle old Victorian on Oyster Inlet."

"Nothing much around there but marsh grass and thickets." But it rose over a curve of the flatland river, he remembered. That tobacco-colored water that could gleam like amber when the sun beamed through the oak and gum trees.

"Your girl likes her privacy," Aubrey told him. "Keeps to herself. Courteous and helpful to her customers, polite, even friendly, but carefully so. She blows cool."

"She's new here." He understood what it was like to find yourself in a place, one that had just exactly what you wanted, and not be sure if you'd find your slot. "She could probably use a friend."

"And speaking of friends, your new friend just came in."

"Who?" But he knew even before he swiveled around on the stool and spotted her.

She moved with purpose and easy grace around the stained tables and rickety chairs.

"Classy" was Aubrey's one-word summation.

"Oh, yeah." Seth dug out money for the drinks, tossed it on the bar. "I'm ditching you, kid."

Aubrey widened her eyes in exaggerated shock. "Color me amazed."

He leaned down to give her a quick kiss before strolling off to intercept Dru.

She stopped by a table and began speaking to a waitress. Seth's attention was so focused on Dru that it took him a moment to recognize the other woman.

Terri Hardgrove. Blond, sulky, and built. She and Seth had dated for a couple of memorable months during his junior year of high school. It had not ended well, Seth recalled, and he nearly detoured just to avoid the confrontation. Instead, he tried an easy smile and kept going until he caught some of their conversation.

"I'm not going to take the place after all," Terri said as she balanced her tray on one hip. "J.J. and me worked things out."

"J.J." Dru angled her head. "That would be the low-life, lying scum you never wanted to see again even if he was gasping his last dying breath?"

"Well"—Terri shifted her feet—"we hadn't worked things out when I said that. It was just that I saw your 'For Rent' sign when I was so mad at him and all. But we worked things out."

"So you said. Congratulations. It might've been helpful if

you'd come by this afternoon as we'd agreed and let me know."

"I'm really sorry, but that's when . . ."

"You were working things out," Dru finished.

"Hey, Terri."

She squealed. "Seth! Seth Quinn! Just look at you."

"How's it going?"

"It's going just fine. I heard you were back, but now here you are. Big as life and twice as handsome—and famous, too. It's sure been some while since St. Chris High."

"Some time," he agreed, and looked at Dru.

"Y'all know each other?" Terri asked.

"We've met," Dru said. "I'll leave you to catch up on old times."

"We'll catch up later." He took off, leaving Terri pouting at his back as he caught up with Dru.

"Why don't I buy you a drink?"

"I don't want a drink, thank you, and I'm getting out of here before my eardrums are permanently damaged by that amazingly loud and untalented band." And your blond companion is watching me like your guard dog, Dru decided.

He pulled open the door for her. "The flowers were a hit."

"I'm glad to hear it." She took her keys out of her purse.

"So you've got a space to rent?"

"Apparently." She moved dismissively to the driver's side of a black Mercedes SUV.

Seth got his hand on the handle before she did, then just leaned companionably against the door. "Where?"

"Above the shop."

"And you want to rent it?"

"It's empty. Seems like a waste of space." She looked down at the door handle. "I can't drive my car unless I'm inside of it."

"Above the shop," he repeated, and brought the building back into his mind. "Bank of three windows, front and back," he said aloud. "Should be good light. How big is it?"

"Nine hundred square feet, including a small galley-style kitchen."

"Big enough. Let's take a look."

"Excuse me?"

"Show me the space. I might be interested."

She gave the keys in her hand an impatient jiggle. "You want me to show you the apartment now?"

"You don't want to waste space, why waste time?" He opened her car door. "I'll follow you back. It won't take long," he said with that slow, easy grin. "I make up my mind pretty quick."

Four

SHE made up her mind quickly as well, Dru thought as she backed out of the pub's lot. And she had Seth Quinn pegged.

A confident man and a talented one. He was attractive. The lean, lanky build that looked as though it had been designed to wear those worn-out jeans. All that bronze hair, straight as a pin and never quite styled. The hollowed cheeks, the vivid blue eyes. Not just vivid in color. In intensity. The way he looked at you, as if he saw something no one else could see. Something you couldn't see yourself. It made you wonder about him.

Women, she concluded, were like paints on a palette to him. He could dab into any one of them at his whim. The way he'd been snuggled up with the blonde in the bar—a little play she'd noted the instant she herself had walked in—was a case in point.

Yet here she was, she admitted, driving back to the shop to show him the second-floor apartment when what she really wanted to do was go home to her lovely, quiet house.

It was the sensible thing to do, of course. There was no point in the space staying empty. But it galled that he'd assumed she'd take the time and trouble simply because he wanted her to.

It was barely nine on a cool spring evening, but the waterfront was all but deserted. A few boats moored, swaying in the current,

a scatter of people strolling under the light of a quarter moon.

Oh, how she loved the waterfront. She'd nearly howled with glee when she'd been able to snag the building for her shop, knowing she'd be able to step outside any time of the day and see the water, the crabbers, the tourists. To feel that moist air on her skin. Even more, to feel part of it all on her own merits, her own terms.

It would have been smarter, more sensible again, to have taken the room above for her own living quarters. But she'd made the conscious and deliberate decision not to live where she worked.

She killed the lights, the engine, then gathered her purse. Seth was there opening her door before she could do it for herself.

"It's pretty dark. Watch your step." He took her arm, started to steer her to the wooden staircase that led to the second level.

"I can see fine, thanks." She eased away from him, then opened her bag for the keys. "There's parking," she began. "And a private entrance, as you see."

"Yeah, I see fine, too. Listen." Halfway up the stairs he laid a hand on her arm to stop her. "Just listen," he said again, and looked out over the houses that lined the road behind them. "It's great, isn't it?"

She couldn't stop the smile. She understood him perfectly. And it was great, that silence.

"It won't be this quiet in a few weeks." He scanned the dark, the houses, the lawns. "Starting with Memorial Day the tourists and the summer people pour in. Nights get longer, warmer, and people hang out. That can be great, too—all that noise. Holiday noise. The kind you hear when you've got an ice-cream cone in your hand and no time clock ticking away in your head."

He turned, aimed those strong blue eyes at her. The jolt from them was elementally physical.

"You like ice-cream cones?" he asked her.

"There'd be something wrong with me if I didn't." She moved quickly up the rest of the steps.

"Nothing wrong with you," he murmured, and stood with his thumbs tucked into his front pockets while she unlocked the door.

She flicked a switch on the wall to turn on the lights, then deliberately left the door open at his back when he stepped in. She saw immediately she needn't have bothered. He wasn't giving her a thought now.

He crossed to the front windows first and began to mutter.

"Excuse me?"

"What? Oh, just calculating the light—sun, angles. Stuff." He crossed back to the rear windows, stood as he had at the front. Muttered as he had at the front.

"The kitchen—" Dru began.

"Doesn't matter." Frowning, he stared up at the ceiling, his gaze so intense she found herself staring up with him.

After a few seconds of standing there silent, staring up, she felt ridiculous. "Is there a problem with the ceiling?"

"Uh-huh. Any objection to skylights, put in at my expense?"

"I . . . well, I don't know. I suppose—"

He wandered the room again, placing his canvases, his paints, his easel, a worktable for sketching, shelves for supplies and equipment. Have to put in a sofa or a bed, he thought. Better a bed in case he worked late enough to just flop down for the night.

"It's a good space," he said at length. "With the skylights it'll work. I'll take it."

She reminded herself that she hadn't actually agreed to the skylights. But then again, she couldn't find any reason to object to them. "That was quick, as advertised. Don't you want to see the kitchen, the bathroom?"

"They got everything kitchens and bathrooms are supposed to have?"

"Yes. No tub, just a shower stall."

"I'm not planning on taking too many bubble baths." He moved back to the front windows again. "Prime view."

"Yes. It's very nice. Not that it's any of my business, but I assume you have any number of places you can stay while you're here. Why do you need an apartment?"

"I don't want to live here. I need studio space."

"I see. Well, studio space, then. Which explains the skylights."

"I really want the space. I need to get back to work. What do you say to a six-month lease?"

"Six months. I'd planned on a full year at a time."

"Six months gives us both an early out if it's not gelling."

She pursed her lips in consideration. "There is that."

"How much are you asking?"

She gave him the monthly rate she'd settled on. "I'll want first and last month's rent when you sign the lease."

"I'll have it for you tomorrow. I've got a family thing on Sunday, and I have to order the skylights, but I'd like to start moving things in right away."

"That's fine." She liked the idea of him painting over her shop. "Congratulations," she said, and offered a hand. "You've got yourself a studio."

"Thanks." He took her hand, held it. Ringless, he thought again. Long, faerie fingers and unpainted nails. "Given any thought to posing for me?"

"No."

His grin flashed at her flat, precise answer. "I'll talk you into it."

"I'm not easily swayed. Let's clear this all up before we start on what should be a mutually satisfying business relationship."

"Okay, let's. You have a strong, beautiful face. As an artist, as a man, I'm drawn to the qualities of strength and beauty. The artist wants to translate them. The man wants to enjoy them. So I'd like to paint you, and I'd like to spend time with you."

Despite the breeze that danced through the open door, she felt entirely too alone with him. "I'm sure you've had your quota of women to translate and enjoy. Such as the buxom blonde in black you were cozied up with at the bar."

"Who . . ." Humor exploded on his face.

It was, Dru thought, like light bursting through shadows.

"Buxom Blonde in Black," he repeated, seeing it as a title. "She'll love that. There'll be no living with her. That was Aubrey. Aubrey Quinn. My brother Ethan's oldest daughter."

"I see. It didn't seem to be a particularly avuncular relationship."

"I don't feel like her uncle. It's more a big-brother thing. She was two when I came to St. Chris. Aubrey's the first person I ever loved, absolutely. She's got strength and beauty, too, and I've certainly translated and enjoyed them. But not in quite the same why I'd like to do with yours."

"Then you're going to be disappointed. I don't have the time to pose, and I don't have the inclination to be enjoyed. You're very attractive, Seth, and if I were going to be shallow—"

"Yeah." Another brilliant, flashing grin. "Let's be shallow."

"Sorry." But he'd teased a smile out of her again. "I gave it up. If I were going to be, I might enjoy you. But as it stands, we're going to settle for the practical," she said.

"We can start there. Now, since you asked me a question earlier, I get to ask you one."

"All right, what?"

He saw by the way her face turned closed-in and wary that she was braced for something personal. So he shifted gears. "Do you like steamed crabs?"

She stared at him for nearly ten seconds and gave him the pleasure of watching her face relax. "Yes, I like steamed crabs."

"Good. We'll have some on our first date. I'll be by in the morning to sign the lease," he added as he walked to the open door.

"The morning's fine."

He looked down as she leaned over to lock the door behind them. Her neck was long, elegant. The contrast between it and the severe cut of the dark hair was sharp and dramatic. Without thinking, he skimmed a finger along the curve, just to sample the texture.

She froze, so that for one instant they made a portrait of themselves. The woman in the rich-colored suit and the man in rough clothes with a fingertip at the nape of her neck.

She straightened with a quick jerk of movement, and Seth let his hand drop away. "Sorry. Irritating habit of mine."

"Do you have many?"

"Yeah, afraid so. That one wasn't anything personal. You've got a really nice line back there."

"I'm an expert on lines, nice or otherwise." She breezed by him and down the steps.

"Hey." He jogged after her. "I've got better lines than that one."

"I'll just bet you do."

"I'll try some out on you. But in the meantime . . ." He opened her car door. "Is there any storage space?"

"Utility room. There." She gestured toward a door under the steps. "Furnace and water heater. And some storage."

"If I need to, can I stick some stuff in there until I get the space worked out? I've got some things coming in from Rome on Monday."

"I don't have a problem with that. The key's inside the shop. Remind me to give it to you tomorrow."

"Appreciate it." He closed the car door for her when she'd climbed in; then he knocked on the window. "You know," he said when she rolled down the window, "I like spending time with a smart, self-confident woman who knows what she wants and goes out and gets it. Very sexy, that kind of direction and dedication."

He waited a beat. "That was a line."

She kept her eyes on his as she rolled the glass up between their faces again. She didn't let herself chuckle until she'd driven away.

THE best thing about Sundays, in Dru's opinion, was waking up slowly, then clinging to that half-dream state while the sunlight shivered through the trees, slid through the windows, and danced on her closed lids.

Sundays were knowing nothing had to be done and countless things could be. There was no charity luncheon, no obligatory family dinner or tennis match at the club cluttering up her Sundays now. There was no marital spat between her parents to referee.

All there was, was Sunday and her lazy enjoyment of it.

In all the months she'd lived here, she'd never once taken that for granted. Nor had she lost a drop of the pleasure it gave her to stand and look out her own windows. There was only lovely, lovely peace.

She opened the window to the cool morning. From there she could admire her own private curve of the river. There were the speckled leaves of the liverwort she'd planted in the shade, its buds a cheery pink. And lily of the valley, with its bells already dancing. And the marsh grass and rushes with the little clearing she'd made for the golden-yellow iris that liked their feet wet.

Seth Quinn had been right about one thing, she thought. She was a woman who knew what she wanted and went out and got it. Perhaps it had taken her some time to realize what that thing was, but when she had, she'd done what needed to be done.

She'd wanted to run a business where she could feel creative and happy. And she'd been determined to be successful in her own right. She'd toyed with the idea of a small nursery or gardening service. She wasn't fully confident in her skills there, but she knew flowers.

She'd wanted a small town where the pace was easy and the demands few. And she'd wanted the water. She loved the look of St. Christopher, the cheerful tidiness of it, and the ever changing moods of the bay. She liked listening to the clang from the channel markers and the throaty call of a foghorn when the mists rolled in.

She'd grown accustomed to and nearly comfortable with the casual friendliness of the locals. And the good-heartedness that had sent Ethan Quinn over to check on her during a storm the previous winter. No, she'd never live in the city again.

Her parents would have to continue to adjust to the distance she'd put between them. Geographically and emotionally. In the end, she was certain it was best for everyone involved.

She loved the peaks and foolishly ornate gingerbread trim of her home. Most would consider it a kind of folly with its fancywork and deep blue color out here among the thickets and marsh. But to her it was a statement. Home could be exactly where you needed, exactly what you needed it to be, if you wanted it enough.

"I'm happy," she said out loud. "I'm happier than I've ever been in my life."

For an hour she worked on the sunny side of the house, where she was determined to establish a combination of shrubbery and

flower bed. She'd spent every evening for a month over the winter planning her flowers. She wanted to keep it simple and a little wild, like a mad cottage garden with columbine and delphiniums and sweet-faced wallflowers all tumbled together.

There were all kinds of art, she thought as she planted fragrant stock. She imagined Seth would approve of her choices of tone and texture here. Not that it mattered, of course. The garden was to please herself.

He certainly hadn't had much to say for himself the day before, she remembered. He'd whipped in just after she opened the doors, handed over the agreed amount, looped his signature on the lease, snatched up the keys, then bolted. Which was all for the best, she reminded herself. She didn't want flirtations right at the moment.

He'd probably had a Saturday morning date with one of the women who'd pined for him while he'd been gone. He looked like the type women might pine for. All that scruffy hair, the lanky build. And the hands. How could you not notice his hands—wide of palm, long of finger.

"Damn it. The key to the utility room." She'd forgotten to give it to him. Not my problem, she thought. If he hadn't been in such a hurry to go, she would've remembered to give him the key.

She planted cranesbill, added some larkspur. Then, cursing, pushed to her feet. It would nag at her all day. She'd worry and wonder about whatever it was he had coming in from Rome. Easier to take the duplicate she had here at home, drive over to Anna Quinn's, and drop it off. It wouldn't take more than twenty minutes.

SETH grabbed the line Ethan tossed him and secured the wooden boat to the dock. The kids leaped out first. Emily, with her long dancer's body, and Deke, gangly as a puppy, at fourteen.

Seth caught Deke in a headlock and looked at Emily. "You weren't supposed to grow up while I was gone."

"Couldn't help it." She laid her cheek on his.

"When do we eat?" Deke wanted to know.

"Guy's got a tapeworm." Aubrey leaped nimbly onto the dock.

"I'm a growing boy," he said with a chuckle.

Seth stepped to the boat, held out his hand, and closed it around Grace's. Her arms slid around him as she stepped on the dock and her cheek rubbed his.

"There now," she said quietly. "That feels just exactly right. Now everything's where it belongs." She leaned back, smiled up at him. "Thank you for the tulips. They're beautiful. I'm sorry I wasn't home."

"So was I. I figured I'd trade them for some of your homemade fries. You still make the best."

"Come to dinner tomorrow. I'll fix some for you."

"With sloppy joes?"

"Guy expects a lot for a bunch of flowers," Ethan commented.

"I heard you got them from the very pretty florist on Market Street." Grace tucked her arm around Seth's waist as they walked toward the house. "And that you've rented the place above the shop for a studio."

"Word travels."

"Fast and wide. Why don't you tell me all about it."

"Nothing to tell yet. But I'm working on it."

SHE was running behind now, and it was her own fault. Certainly there was no reason, she thought, irritated with herself, no *sane* reason she'd felt compelled to shower, to change out of her grubby gardening clothes. Now it was past noon.

Didn't matter, she told herself. It was a lovely day for a drive. She'd spend two minutes on Seth Quinn and the key, then indulge herself at the nursery.

Feel the air! Brisk with spring, moist from the water. The fields on either side of the road were tilled and planted and already running green in the rows.

She made the turn, caught the glint of the sun off the mudflats before the trees took over with their deep shadows.

The old white house was perfect for its setting. Edged by woods, with water hemming its back and the tidy flower-decked lawn skirt-

ing its front. She'd admired it before, the way it sat there, so cozy and comfortable with its front-porch rockers and faded blue shutters. While she felt the whimsy and privacy of her own home suited her perfectly, she could admire the character of the Quinn place. It gave a sense of order without regimentation.

The number of cars in the drive made her frown. A white Corvette, a sturdy SUV, a snappy little convertible, a manly pickup truck, and a sleek and muscular Jaguar. The Jag was Seth's. She'd noticed it, with some admiration, the night before. She nosed up behind it. Two minutes, she reminded herself, and grabbed her purse as she turned off the engine. She heard the blast of music. The teenagers, she figured as she started toward the front door.

She admired the pots and tubs of flowers on the porch. Anna, she knew, had a clever hand for mixing flowers. She knocked briskly, then bumped it up to a pound. No one was going to hear her over the music, even if she used a battering ram.

Resigned, she stepped off the porch and started toward the side of the house. She heard more than music now. There were shouts, squeals, and what she could only describe as maniacal laughter.

The dog came first, a cannonball of black fur with a lolling tongue. She gave him a quick rub, then a nudge, and managed one more step before the boy streaked screaming around the side of the house. Though he held a large plastic weapon in his hand, he was in full retreat. He veered around her. "Better run," he puffed out.

She saw a flash of movement out of the corner of her eye—an instant before she was shot dead in the heart by a stream of cold water. The shock was so great that her mouth dropped open, but she couldn't manage a sound. Just behind her the boy murmured, "Uh-oh." And deserted the field.

Seth, the water rifle in his hand, his hair dripping from the previous attack, took one look at Dru. "Oh, damn."

Helpless, Dru looked down. Her crisp red shirt and navy pants were soaked. The splatter had even managed to reach her face. She lifted her gaze, one that turned from stunned to searing when she noted that Seth was struggling not to laugh.

"Are you *crazy?*"

"Sorry. Really." He swallowed hard, knowing the laugh fighting to burst out of his throat would damn him. "Sorry." He walked to her. "I was after Jake. You got caught in the cross fire." He tried a charming smile, dug a bandanna out of the back pocket of his jeans. "Which proves there are no innocent bystanders in war."

"Which proves," she said between her teeth, "that some men are idiots who can't be trusted with a child's toy."

"Hey, hey, this is a Super Soaker 5000." He lifted the water gun but, catching the gleam in her eyes, hastily lowered it again. "Anyway, I'm really sorry."

"Seth!" Anna rushed around the house. "You moron."

She draped an arm around Dru's shoulder. "I apologize for the idiot children. You poor thing. We'll get you inside and into some dry clothes."

"No, really, I'll just—"

"I insist," Anna interrupted. She guided Dru into the house and up the stairs. "It's a little crazier today, as the whole gang's here. A welcome home for Seth. The guys are about to boil up some crabs."

"I couldn't intrude." Her temper was rapidly sliding toward embarrassment. "I just stopped by to drop off a key for Seth."

"Have some dry clothes, some food, some wine," Anna said warmly. "Kevin's jeans ought to work." She pulled a blue cotton shirt out of her own closet. "I'll just see if I can find a pair in the black hole of his room."

"It's just a little water. You should be down with your family. I should go."

"Honey, you're soaked and you're shivering. Now get out of those wet things. We'll toss them in the dryer while we eat."

With that, she strode out and left Dru alone in the bedroom.

The truth was, Dru was chilled. Giving up, she stripped off the wet shirt. She was just buttoning up when Anna came back in.

"Success." She offered Dru a pair of Levi's. "Just bring your wet things down to the kitchen when you're ready." She started out again, then turned back. "And Dru? Welcome to bedlam."

Close enough, Dru thought. It seemed to her half of St. Christopher must be partying in the Quinns' backyard.

But when she snuck a peek out, she realized the noise was generated by the Quinns all by themselves. There were teenagers of varying sizes and sexes running around, and two—no, three—dogs. Make that four, she noted as an enormous retriever bounded out of the water and raced over the lawn to shake drops on as many people as possible. Boats were tied to the dock—which explained, she supposed, why the number of cars in the drive didn't match the number of picnickers.

The Quinns sailed. They were also loud, wet, and messy.

The scene below was nothing like any of her parents' outdoor social events or family gatherings. The music would have been classical and muted. The conversations would have been calm and ordered. And the tables would have been meticulously set.

She changed into the Levi's. The boy—Kevin, she thought Anna had said—was tall. She had to roll up the legs a couple of times. She gathered the rest of her wet things and started downstairs.

There was a piano in the living room. It looked ancient and well used. The red lilies she'd sold Seth stood in a cut-crystal vase atop it and spilled their fragrance into the air.

There were paintings—waterscapes, cityscapes, still lifes—that she was certain were Seth's. But it was a lovely little pencil sketch that drew her over. It was the rambling white house flanked by woods, trimmed by water. It said with absolute simplicity, This is home. And it touched a chord in her that made her yearn.

Stepping closer, she studied the careful signature in the bottom corner. Such a careful signature, she recognized it as a child's even before she read the date printed beneath.

He'd drawn it when he was a child, she realized. Just a little boy making a picture of his home—and already recognizing its value, already talented and insightful enough to translate that value, that warmth and stability with his pencil. Helplessly, her heart softened. He might be an idiot with an oversize water pistol, but he was a good man. If art reflected the artist, he was a very special man.

She followed the sound of voices back into the kitchen. This, she recognized immediately, was another family center.

Seth stood with his arm around Anna's shoulders. Their heads were close together. Love. Dru could feel the flow of it from across the room—the simple, strong, steady flow of it. The din might have continued from outside, people might have winged in and out the back door, but the two of them made a little island of affection.

She'd always been attracted to that kind of connection, and she found herself smiling at them before the woman—that would be Grace—backed out of the enormous refrigerator with yet another platter in hand.

"Oh, Dru. Here, let me take those." Grace set the bowl aside; Anna and Seth turned.

Dru's heart might have softened toward the artist, but she wasn't about to let the idiot off the hook. "Thanks. They're only damp, really. The shirt got the worst of it."

Seth stepped forward. "Sorry. Really. I don't know how I mistook you for a thirteen-year-old boy."

The stare she aimed at him could have frozen a pond at ten paces. "Why don't we just say I was in the wrong place at the wrong time and leave it at that."

"No, this is the right place." He took her hand, lifted it to his lips in what she imagined he thought of as a charming gesture. And damn it, it was.

"Crabs are going in," Jake told Seth as he swung through the back door. "Dad says for you to get your ass out there."

"Jake!"

Jake sent his mother an innocent look. "I'm just the messenger. We're *starving.*"

"Here." Anna stuffed a deviled egg into his mouth. "Now carry this outside."

"Ah, is there something I can do to help?" Dru asked.

"Grab whatever, take it out. We'll be feeding the masses shortly."

Anna lifted her eyebrows as Seth grabbed a platter, then pushed the door open for Dru and her bowl of coleslaw. Then Anna

wiggled those eyebrows at Grace. "They look cute together."

"They do," Grace agreed. "I like her." She wandered to the door to spy out with Anna. "She's always a little cool at first; then she warms up. She's awfully pretty, isn't she? And so . . . polished."

"Money usually puts a gleam on you. She's a bit stiff yet, but if this group can't loosen her up, nothing can. Seth's very attracted."

"So I noticed." Grace turned her head toward Anna. "I guess we'd better find out more about her."

"My thoughts exactly." Anna went back to fetch the wine.

THE Quinn brothers were impressive examples of the species individually. As a group, Dru decided, they were staggering. They might not have shared blood, but they were so obviously fraternal—tall, lanky, handsome, and, most of all, male.

The quartet around the huge steaming pot simply exuded manhood like other men might a distinctive aftershave. They were what they were, she thought, and were pretty damned pleased about it.

As a woman she found that sort of innate self-satisfaction attractive. She respected confidence and a good, healthy ego. At Anna's request she wandered around to the brick pit, where they steamed the crabs, to deliver a foursome of cold beer.

"Gentlemen," Dru said. "Cold beer for hot work."

"Thanks." Phillip took them from her. "Heard you've already cooled off once today."

"Unexpectedly." Ignoring Seth, she looked at Ethan. "Did you catch them?" she asked, gesturing to the pot.

"Deke and I, yeah." He grinned when Seth cleared his throat. "We took Seth along for ballast. Got blisters on his city hands."

"Couple days in the boatyard might toughen him up," Cam speculated. "Always was puny, though."

"You're just trying to insult me so I'll come in and do the hot work." Seth tipped back his beer. "Keep dreaming."

"Puny," Phillip said, "but smart. Always was smart."

"I wonder if I could come in sometime, take a look around at your work."

Cam tilted his head toward Dru. "Like boats, do you?"

"Yes, I do."

"Why don't we go for a sail?" Seth asked her.

"Keep dreaming," she suggested, and strolled away.

"Classy" was Phillip's opinion.

"She's a nice girl," Ethan said as he checked the pot.

"Got a bead on her?" Cam shook his head as if in pity. "She looks out of your league to me, kid."

"Yeah." Seth gulped beer. "I'm a big fan of inter-league play."

Phillip watched Seth wander off, then chuckled. "Our boy's going to be spending a hell of a lot of money on flowers for the next little while."

"Got careful eyes." Ethan gave the traditional Quinn shoulder jerk. "Watches everything, including Seth, but it's all one step back, you know. Not because she's shy—the girl isn't shy. She's careful."

"She comes from big money and politics." Phillip considered his beer. "Bound to make you careful."

"St. Chris is a funny place for her to end up, isn't it?" To Cam's mind, family forged you—the family you were born to or the family you made. He wondered how Dru's had forged her.

SHE'D intended to stay no more than an hour while her clothes dried. But somehow she was drawn into a conversation with Emily about New York. And one with Anna about gardening. Then there were the mutual acquaintances with Sybill from D.C.

The food was wonderful. Dogs sidled up to the table and were ordered firmly away—usually after someone snuck food into a canine mouth. There were arguments—over baseball, clothes, video games. It didn't take her long to realize it was just another kind of interaction. The breeze blew in cool over the water, while as many as six conversations went on at the same time.

She nursed a second glass of wine and stayed. Not just because she couldn't find a polite way to leave. Because she liked them. She was amused by and envious of the intimacy of the family. Despite their numbers and the obvious differences, they were all

so firmly interlinked. Like individual pieces of one big, bold puzzle.

The puzzle of family always fascinated her. However colorful and cheerful they seemed on the surface, Dru imagined the Quinn puzzle had its share of complications. Families always did.

As did men, she thought, turning her head deliberately to meet Seth's dead-on stare. She was perfectly aware that he'd watched her almost continually since they'd sat down to eat. She could feel his gaze, a kind of heat along her skin.

"The afternoon light's good here." His eyes still on Dru, he scooped up a forkful of pasta salad. "Maybe we'll do some outdoor work. You got anything with a long, full skirt? Strapless or sleeveless to show off your shoulders. Good strong shoulders," he added with another scoop of pasta. "They go with the face."

Dru sipped the last of her wine. "Has anyone ever declined to be painted by you?"

"No, not really."

"Let me be the first."

"He'll do it anyway," Cam told her. "Kid's got a head like a brick."

"Anybody got room for dessert?" Anna asked as she rose.

They did, though Dru didn't see how. She declined offers of cakes and pies but lost the battle of wills over a double fudge brownie.

She finally changed back into her own clothes, folded the borrowed shirt and jeans, set them on the bed, took one last look around the cozy bedroom, then started down.

Dru stopped short in the kitchen doorway when she spotted Anna and Cam in front of the sink in an embrace a great deal more torrid than she expected from parents of teenagers.

"Let's go upstairs and lock the door," Dru heard him say. "No one will miss us."

"That's what you said after dinner last Thanksgiving." There was both warmth and fun in her voice when Anna linked her arms around Cam's neck. "You were wrong. . . . Oh, Dru."

From the easy grins on their faces, Dru concluded she was the only one of the trio who was the least bit embarrassed. "I'm sorry. I wanted to thank you for the hospitality."

"Good. Then you'll come again. Cam, let Seth know Dru's leaving, will you?"

"Don't bother. You have a wonderful family, a beautiful home. I appreciate your letting me share them today."

"I'm glad you dropped by," Anna said, giving Cam a silent signal as she walked Dru to the front door.

"The key." Dru dug into her purse. "I completely forgot the reason I came by in the first place. Would you give this to Seth?"

Anna heard the kitchen door slam. "You might as well give it to him yourself," she said, then gave Dru a quick kiss on the cheek.

"Taking off?" A little winded, Seth hurried up to catch Dru on the front porch. "Why don't you stay? Aubrey's getting a softball game together."

"I have to get home. The key." She held it out, while he only stood looking at her. "Utility room? Storage?"

"Yeah, yeah." He stuffed it into his pocket. "Listen, it's early, but if you want to split, we can go somewhere. A drive or something."

"I have things to do." She walked toward her car.

"We'll have to try for less of a crowd on our second date."

She paused. "We haven't had a first date yet."

"Sure we did. Steamed crabs, just as predicted."

Jiggling the car keys in her hand, she turned to face him. "I came by to give you the key, got blasted with a water gun, and had a crab feast with your large family. That doesn't make this a date."

"This will."

He had a move so smooth she never saw it coming. His hands cupped her shoulders, and his mouth was warm and firm on hers.

He lifted her just slightly. He tilted his head just a little, so his lips rubbed hers—a seductive tease—and his hands cruised down her body to add an unexpected punch of heat.

He'd only intended to skim the surface, perhaps to show them both hints of what could lie beneath. But when she'd leaned into him, locked around him, he sank.

Women were a dazzling array of colors for him. Mother, sister, lover, friend. But he'd never had another woman strike him with such brilliance. He wanted to steep in it—in her—until they were both drenched. "Let me come home with you, Drusilla." He skimmed his lips over her cheek, down to her throat.

She shook her head. "I'm not impulsive. I'm not rash. I don't share myself with a man just because there's heat."

"Okay." He pressed his lips to her forehead before he stepped back. "Stay. We'll play some ball, maybe go for a sail. We'll keep it simple today."

With some men the suggestion would have been just another ploy to persuade her into bed. But he meant what he said, she decided. "I might actually like you after a while."

"Counting on it."

"But I can't stay. I left a number of things undone to come by, and I've stayed much longer than I intended."

"Didn't you ever ditch school?"

"No."

He braced a hand on the car door before she could open it, and his face was sincerely shocked. "Not once?"

"Afraid not."

"A rule player," he considered. "Sexy."

She had to laugh. "If I said I'd skipped school once a week, you'd have called me a rebel and said *that* was sexy."

"How about dinner tomorrow night?"

"No." She waved him away from the car door. "I need to think about this. I don't want to be interested in you."

"Which means you are."

She slid behind the wheel. "Which means I don't want to be. I'll let you know if I change my mind. Go back to your family. You're lucky to have them," she said, then closed the car door.

He watched her back out, then drive away. His blood was still warm from the kiss, and his mind too full of her and the possibilities for him to take notice of the car that eased from the shoulder of the road by the trees, then followed after Dru's.

Five

SHE knew he moved in. Now and again when Dru went into the back room of the shop, she could hear music through the vents. It didn't surprise her that he played it loud or that his choices varied from head-banging rock to mellow blues and passionate opera.

Nothing about Seth Quinn surprised her.

Occasionally he breezed in and out of the shop to ask if she needed anything, to let her know he'd be starting on the skylights.

He was always friendly, never seemed particularly rushed. And never attempted to follow up on the steamy afternoon kiss.

It irked her. She'd been set to deflect any follow-up, at least for the time being. She had no intention of Seth, or any man, taking her availability for granted. That was simply principle.

And of course, it was expected that he would follow up. A man didn't ask to take you to bed one day, then treat you like a casual neighbor the next. So perhaps he had surprised her after all. Which only irritated her more.

Just as well, she told herself as she worked on the small table arrangements she sold to one of the waterfront's upscale restaurants. She was settling into St. Chris, into her business, into the kind of life she'd always wanted. A relationship, whether an affair or a romance, would change the balance. And she was so enjoying the balance.

She heard Seth arrive—the sound of the car door slamming, the crunch of footsteps over gravel, then the quick slap of them up the back steps. Moments later came the music. Rock today, she noted.

She picked up the plant she'd earmarked, then headed out the back and up the steps. A polite knock wouldn't do, not with the music blaring, so she used the side of her fist to pound.

"Yeah, yeah, it's open. Since when do you guys knock?"

He turned, in the act of strapping on a tool belt, as she opened

the door. "Hey." His smile came quick and easy. "I thought you were one of my brothers, but you're a lot better-looking."

"I thought you might like this."

"What? Wait." He walked into the tiny kitchen where he'd set a tabletop stereo and turned down the volume. "Sorry."

"I bought you a plant." Her tone was sharper than she intended.

"Yeah?" Despite her tone, he looked very pleased as he crossed over and took the pot from her. "Thanks."

"It's a shamrock," she told him. "Quinn. It seemed to fit."

"Guess it does." Then those blue eyes lifted, locked on hers. "I appreciate it."

"Don't let it dry out." She glanced up. Two skylights were already installed. And he was right, she mused. They made all the difference. "You've been busy."

"Hmm. Traded some time at the boatyard for some labor here. Cam's going to give me a hand today, so we should finish up."

"Well then." She glanced around. After all, she owned the place. She could take some interest in what went on there.

He had canvases stacked against two of the walls. An easel with a blank canvas was already set up in front of the windows. An enormous worktable was plopped in the center of the room and already covered with the detritus of the artist: brushes, paints, a mason jar of turpentine, rags, pencils, chalks.

"You seem to be settling in. I'll let you get back to it." But one of the propped canvases drew her. A riot of wild foxglove under pearly light pulled her in, so that she could almost feel the brush of leaves and petals on her skin.

"A roadside in Ireland," he said. "County Clare."

"It's wonderful. I've never seen foxglove growing wild on a roadside in Ireland. But now I feel I have."

He stared at her a moment. The morning sun speared through the skylight and streamed over her, accented the line of jaw and cheek. "Just stand there. Just stand right there," he repeated as he swung to his worktable. "Ten minutes. Okay, I lied. Twenty, tops."

"Excuse me?"

He scooped up a hunk of charcoal, then dragged his easel around. "No. Don't look at me. Look over there at the foxgloves."

"I don't have time to—"

"Uh-huh, uh-huh. Tilt your chin up a little to the right. Relax your jaw. Be pissed off later. Just let me get this."

His eyes were narrowed, so intense, so *focused,* that her heart jumped a little each time they whipped up and over her face. Not entirely sure why she allowed herself to be ordered around, she continued to stand and study the foxgloves. She began to see it gracing her bedroom wall. "How much do you want for it?"

He only grunted and continued to work. "Don't move your head, just your eyes. And look at me. That's some face, all right."

"Yes, and I'm certainly all aflutter by your interest in it, but I have to go down and open for the day."

"Couple more minutes."

"Would you like to hear my opinion of people who can't take no for an answer?"

"Not right now." Keep her occupied, keep her talking, he thought quickly. It was perfect—the light, the face, that cool stare out of mossy green eyes. "You really want the painting?"

"That depends on how much really wanting it jacks up the price."

"You're pretty cynical."

"Cynicism is underrated."

He loved the way that short, sleek hair followed the shape of her head. He wanted to do more than sketch it. He needed to paint it. And to touch it. To run his hands over that silky, dense black until he'd know its texture in his sleep.

"Let's do a trade. Pose for me, and it's yours."

"I believe I just did."

"No. I want you in oil." And in watercolors. In pastels. In bed.

He'd spent a great deal of time thinking about her over the last few days. Enough time to have concluded that a woman like her would be used to men in active pursuit. So he'd slowed things down deliberately and had waited for her to take the next step. She had. In the form of a houseplant.

"I have a business to run," she began.

"I'll work around your schedule. Give me an hour in the mornings before you open when you can. Four hours on Sundays."

She frowned. It didn't seem like so very much when he put it like that. And oh, the painting was gorgeous. "For how long?"

"I don't know yet. It's art, not accounting."

Because it was a foolish woman who made any agreement without looking at all the terms, she walked to the easel, around the canvas. And studied her own face. She'd expected something rough and, well, sketchy, as he'd taken no more than fifteen minutes to produce it. Instead, it was detailed and stunning—the angles, the shadows, the curves.

She looked very cool, she decided. A bit aloof and so very very serious. "I don't look particularly friendly," she said.

"You weren't feeling particularly friendly."

"Can't argue with that. Or with the fact that you have an amazing gift." She sighed. "I don't have a dress with a long, full skirt and a sleeveless top."

He grinned. "We'll improvise."

"I'll give you an hour tomorrow. Seven thirty to eight thirty."

"Okay." He took the foxglove painting and held it out to her.

"You're trusting."

"Trust is underrated."

When her hands were full, he took her arms. He gave her that slight lift again, brought her to her toes. And the door swung open.

"Nope," Seth muttered as Cam strode in. "They never knock."

"Hi, Dru. Kiss the girl on your own time, kid." He spotted the canvas, and his face lit with pure delight. "Easiest fifty I ever made. I bet Phil that Seth would talk you into posing before the week was up."

"Oh, really?"

"No offense. He's a pain in the ass half the time, but he's no fool. Rembrandt here wants to paint something, he finds a way." The look on his face when he studied the canvas was filled with pride.

"I'm aware of the pain-in-the-ass factor. I'll reserve judgment on

whether or not he's a fool. Seven thirty," she said to Seth on her way out. "That's a.m."

Cam said nothing, just laid a beat with an open hand on his heart.

SETH was a man of his word. When the last of the skylights were in place, he followed Cam to the boatyard to put in a few hours.

Once, he'd thought he'd make his living here, working with his brothers building wooden sailing vessels. The fact was, some of his best memories were tucked inside the old brick building, flavored with his sweat and the thrill of learning to be a part of something.

Lining the walls were his rough-framed sketches of various boats built by Quinn over the years. They depicted the progress of the business and the growth of the artist. He knew, because Aubrey had told him, that an art collector had come in two years before and offered his brothers a quarter million for the fifty sketches currently on display. They'd turned him down flat.

It had never been about money, he thought now, though there had been some lean times during those first couple years. It had always been about the unit. And a promise made to Ray Quinn.

The work area itself hadn't changed very much. It was all as familiar to him as his own face.

"You plan on standing there?" Cam asked him. "Or are we going to get some work out of you this afternoon?"

Seth shook himself back to the present.

He spotted Aubrey working on the deck planking of a skiff, her electric screwdriver whirling. Ethan was at the lathe, turning a mast with his faithful dog, Nigel, sprawled at his feet.

"Hull of that skiff needs to be caulked and filled," Cam said.

Grunt work, Seth thought. "What are you going to be doing?"

"Basking in the glory of my little empire."

The basking included detailing the bulkhead for the cockpit, the sort of carpentry Cam turned into an art.

Seth did the grunt work; it was hardly the first time. He knew how to plank, he thought a bit resentfully as Aubrey's drill continued its bump and grind over his head.

"Hey"—Aubrey bent down to talk to him—"I got more juice on the flower lady."

"What kind of juice?"

"Juicy juice, sweetheart. I got it from Jamie Styles, who got it from her cousin, who was a Senate page a few years ago. Dru and a certain high-level White House aide were a hot item back then."

"How hot?"

"Hot enough to burn up the society columns in the *Post* for nearly a year. And to warrant what Jamie's cousin describes as an engagement ring with a diamond the size of a doorknob. Then the hot goes cold, and the high-level aide starts burning up the newsprint with a blonde. It so happens that this blonde was—is—a hotshot lawyer, assistant White House counsel or something."

"Must've been tough on Dru, having all that personal business splashed around in the press."

"She strikes me as someone who'd stand up to it pretty well. She's nobody's doormat. And I bet you a month's pay she stuffed that cheating bastard's ring down his throat."

"More like she froze him to death with one chilly look and a few icy words."

Aubrey snorted. "A lot you know about women. Still waters, pal. They not only run deep, they can run hot, too."

MAYBE, Seth thought as he dropped his filthy, aching body back behind the wheel of his car. But he'd lay money Dru had sliced the guy in two without spilling a single drop of blood.

He glanced at the time as he pulled out. He could use a pizza, and it seemed a waste of effort to drive all the way home to shower, then head right back into town.

So he'd just swing by and clean up at the studio. He might find Dru still at the shop and talk her into a friendly pizza. Which would, he thought, pleased with the idea, constitute date number three.

But her car was gone from the little lot behind her building. He considered calling her, persuading her to come back into town, before he remembered he didn't have a phone. Better, he decided

as he started up the steps, he'd get a pizza to go and stop by her house on the way home. With a bottle of merlot.

Satisfied with the plan, he stepped inside and felt something skid under his foot. Frowning, he reached down and picked up the folded note that had been slipped under his door.

His stomach pitched as the bottom fell out of his world.

Ten thousand should hold me. I'll be in touch.

Seth crumpled the paper into a tiny, mean ball.

Gloria DeLauter was back. He hadn't expected her to find or follow him so quickly—barely two weeks after he'd left Rome. He'd wanted time to think, to decide. He flipped the little wad of paper across the room. Well, ten thousand would buy him time.

When it came to his mother, there was no price he wouldn't pay to be free of her. And more, to keep his family free of her.

It was, of course, exactly what she counted on.

Six

HE WAS sitting on the dock pole-fishing, with a smear of Anna's Brie for bait. The sun was summer hot on his back.

He heard the yip of a dog, then the scrambling of canine feet on the dock. Seth didn't look up, even when the cold nose nudged at his cheek. He simply lifted an arm so the dog could wiggle against his side. It was always comforting, somehow, to have a dog at your side when your thoughts were heavy.

But that wasn't enough for the dog, whose tail pounded a drumbeat on the dock as its tongue slathered over Seth's cheek.

"Okay, okay, cool it," he began, then felt his heart jump into his throat. Not Cam's dog, but his own. Foolish, who'd died in Seth's arms five years before. Speechless, Seth stared as those familiar doggie eyes seemed to laugh into his.

"Wait a minute." Joy and shock tangled inside him as he grabbed the dog's muzzle. Warm fur, cold nose, wet tongue. "What the hell is this?"

Foolish gave another cheerful bark, then flopped adoringly across Seth's lap.

"There you are, you stupid idiot," Seth murmured as unspeakable love gushed inside him. "I've missed you." He bobbled the pole, let go of it as he grabbed for his dog.

A hand reached out, snagged the pole before it dropped into the water. "Wouldn't want to waste that fancy cheese," said the woman who sat beside him, legs dangling over the dock. "We figured Foolish would cheer you up. Nothing biting today?"

"No, not . . ." The words slipped back down his throat as he looked at her. He knew that face; he'd seen it in pictures. Long and thin, scattershot freckles over the nose and cheeks. She had a shapeless khaki hat over messy red curls that were streaked with silver. And her dark green eyes were unmistakable.

"You're Stella. Stella Quinn." Stella Quinn, he thought as he tried to make sense of it, who'd been dead more than twenty years.

"You turned out handsome, didn't you? Always thought you would."

"I guess I'm dreaming."

"I guess you are," she said easily. "You've got Ray's eyes. I fell for his eyes first, you know."

"I always wanted to meet you. I never dreamed about you before. Not like this." The fact was, Seth'd never dreamed with this kind of clarity. He could feel the warm fur under his hand and the steady beat of heart as Foolish panted in the heat.

"We figured it was time I got to play grandma." She gave Seth an affectionate pat on the knee. "I missed that while I was here, spoiling you and the others. Dying's damn inconvenient, let me tell you."

When he simply stared at her, she let out a long, clear laugh. "It's natural enough to be a little spooked. It's not every day you sit around talking to a ghost."

"I don't believe in ghosts."

"Hard to blame you." She looked out over the water, and something in her face spoke of absolute contentment. "You're Ray's grandson, so that makes you mine."

His pulse was galloping, but he didn't feel fear. "He was good to me. I only had him for a little while, but he was . . ."

"Decent." She nodded as she said it. "That's what you told Cam when he asked you. Ray was decent, you said, and you sure as hell hadn't had much decent up till then, poor little guy."

"He changed everything for me."

"He gave you a chance to change everything. You've done a pretty good job of it so far."

"Ray took me in, and it killed him. He wouldn't have been on that road if it hadn't been for me."

"Ray'd be disappointed to hear you say that." She poked him again. "Damn fool always drove too fast. If not that road that day, another road another day. Things happen, and that's that."

"But—"

"What if Ray hadn't brought you here, if he hadn't run into that damn telephone pole? Maybe Cam and Anna wouldn't have met. Then Kevin and Jake wouldn't have been born. You wishing them away?"

"No, of course not. But if Gloria—"

"Ah." With a satisfied nod Stella lifted a finger. "There's the nub, isn't it? No point in saying, 'If Gloria' or 'But Gloria.' Gloria DeLauter is reality."

"She's back."

Her face softened, her voice gentled. "Yes, honey, I know."

"I won't let her touch their lives again. I won't let her mess up my family. She only wants money. It's all she's ever wanted."

"You think?" Stella sighed. "Well, if you do, I suppose you'll give it to her. Again."

"What else can I do?"

"You'll figure it out." She handed him the pole.

He woke sitting on the side of the bed, his hand loosely fisted as if it held a fishing pole.

Weird, he thought. Very weird dream. And he could swear he felt the lingering warmth from his dog stretched across his lap.

RAY Quinn's pre-Stella affair with a woman named Barbara Harrow had been brief. He'd put it so completely behind him that his three adopted sons had been totally unaware of it. Just as Ray had been unaware of the product of that affair.

Gloria DeLauter.

But Gloria had known about Ray and had tracked him down. In her usual style she'd used extortion and blackmail to bleed Ray for money. And had, in essence, sold her son to her father eighteen years ago. But Ray had died suddenly, before he found the way to tell his sons and his grandchild of the connection.

The Quinn brothers had been bound to him by no more than a promise to a dying man. But that had been enough. They'd changed their lives for him. They'd given him a home, stood up for him, shown him what it was to be part of a family. And they'd fought to keep him.

Anna had been his caseworker. Grace his first surrogate mother. And Sybill, Gloria's half sister, had brought back the only soft memories of his childhood.

He knew how much they'd sacrificed to give him a life. A life as decent as Ray Quinn's. By the time Gloria had stepped back into the picture, hoping to bleed them for more money, he'd been one of them. One of the brothers Quinn.

This wasn't the first time Gloria had approached him for money. He'd had three years to forget her, to feel safe after his new family had circled around him. Then she'd slithered back to St. Chris and had extorted money from a fourteen-year-old boy.

He'd never told them of it. He'd paid her off each time until he'd fled to Europe. His time there hadn't been only to work and to study but to escape. Or so he'd thought.

His success as an artist, the resulting publicity, had given Gloria big ideas. And bigger demands.

He knew how she worked. She wouldn't pop up on his doorstep

right away. She'd let him stew and worry and wonder until ten thousand seemed like a bargain for a little peace of mind. She wouldn't be staying in St. Chris, wouldn't risk being seen and recognized by his brothers or sisters. But she'd be close.

He wasn't running again. She wouldn't make him deprive himself of home and family a second time.

HE'D wheedled a second morning session out of Dru. From the sitting the previous week, she expected him to be ready to start when she arrived, precisely at seven thirty. And to stop exactly sixty minutes later. To ensure he did, she'd brought a kitchen timer with her.

When he looked at her, he felt all the models he'd used throughout his career had been simply precursors to Drusilla.

She had knocked. She kept that formal distance between them.

"Right on time. Big surprise. Want coffee?" He'd had his hair cut. It was still long, but the ponytail was gone.

"No, thanks. I've had a cup already this morning."

"One?" He closed the door behind her. "I can barely form a simple declarative sentence on one hit of coffee."

She went to the stool he'd set out for her, slid onto it.

She noticed the change immediately. He'd bought a bed. The frame was old—a simple black iron head—and the footboard showed some dings. The mattress was bare and still had the tags.

"Moving in after all?"

He glanced over. "No. But it's better than the floor if I end up working late and bunking here. Plus, it's a good prop."

Her brow lifted. "Oh, really?"

"Are you usually so preoccupied with sex, or is it just around me?" It made him laugh when her mouth dropped open. "A prop," he said, "like that chair over there, those old bottles. I pick up things as they catch my eye. Including women."

"That's quite a speech for one 'Oh, really.' "

"Sugar, you pack a lot of punch into an 'Oh, really.' Do you remember the pose?" he asked as he moved to his easel.

"Yes." Obediently she propped her foot on the rung of the stool,

laced her hands around her knee, then looked over her left shoulder as if someone had just spoken to her. "I sat like this for an hour just a few days ago."

"An hour," he repeated as he began to work. "Before the wild debauchery of the weekend."

"I'm so used to wild debauchery it doesn't have a particular impact on my life."

It was his turn. "Oh, really?"

He mimicked her tone so perfectly, she broke the pose to look toward him, laughing. "I minored in WD in college."

"If only." His fingers hurried to capture the bright, beautiful laughter. "I know your type, baby. You walk around being beautiful, smart, sexy, and unapproachable so we guys just suffer and dream."

It was obviously the wrong thing to say as the humor on her face died instantly. "You don't know anything about me or my type."

"I didn't say that to hurt your feelings. I'm sorry."

She shrugged. "I don't know you well enough for you to hurt my feelings. I know you just well enough to have you annoy me."

"Then I'm sorry for that. I was joking. I like hearing you laugh."

"Unapproachable," she muttered. "Did you think I was so damned unapproachable when you grabbed me and kissed me?"

"I'd say the act speaks for itself. Look. A lot of times when a guy sees a woman—a beautiful one he's attracted to—he gets clumsy. It's easier to figure she's out of reach than to analyze his own clumsiness. Women scare the hell out of us."

"Do you honestly expect me to believe you're afraid of women?"

"Well, I had some advantage, with all those sisters. But the first girl I was ever serious about? It took me two weeks to get up the nerve to call her on the phone."

"How old were you?"

"Fifteen. Marilyn Pomeroy, a giddy little brunette."

Her lips twitched. "I was serious about a boy when I was fifteen. Wilson Bufferton Lawrence. The Fourth. Buff to his friends."

"What do you do with somebody named Buff? Play polo or squash?"

"Tennis, actually. On our first date we played tennis at the club. I beat him in straight sets, and that was the end of our tender romance. I was crushed; then I was mad. I liked being mad better."

"What became of Buff?"

"As I was informed by my mother over the weekend, he's going to be married for the second time this fall. I was reminded—a total of five times, I believe—that I've yet to afford my parents with the pleasure of spending lavish amounts of money on a wedding that would show the Lawrences, among others, a thing or two."

"So you and your mother had a nice visit on Mother's Day."

She took a deep breath. "My visits with my mother can rarely be defined as nice. I suspect you spent this past Sunday going to see each one of your mothers—sisters."

"I spent some time with each of them. Took them their presents. And since each one of them cried, I figure they were a big hit."

"What did you get them?"

"I did small family portraits for each one—Anna and Cam and the boys and so on."

"That's nice. That's lovely," she said softly. "I got my mother a Baccarat vase and a dozen red roses. She was very pleased."

He set down his pastels and crossed to her. Took her face in his hands. "Then why do you look so sad?"

"I'm not sad." She couldn't remember ever having a conversation like this with anyone before. "It would be difficult for you to understand a conflicted family when yours is so united."

"We have plenty of conflicts," he corrected.

"No. Not at the core, you don't. I need to get downstairs."

"I still have some time left," he said. "If there's one thing I know about, it's family conflict and what it does to you inside. I spent the first third of my life in a constant state of conflict."

"Before you came to live with your grandfather? I've read stories about you, but you don't discuss that aspect," she said.

"Yeah. Before. When I lived with my biological mother."

"I see."

"No, sugar, you don't. She was a whore and a drunk and a junkie, and she made the first few years of my life a nightmare."

"I'm sorry." She touched his hand in an instinctive gesture of comfort. "It must have been horrible. Still, it's obvious she's nothing to you."

"That's what you got out of one statement from me and a handful of articles?"

"No. That's what I got after eating crab and potato salad with you and your family. Now you look sad." She shook her head. "I don't know why we're talking about these things."

"That's what people do—people who are interested in each other. They talk about who they are and where they've come from."

"I told you—"

"Yeah, you don't want to be interested. But you are." He traced a finger over her hair, from the short, spiky bangs to the tender nape. "And since we've been dating for several weeks—"

"We haven't dated at all."

He leaned down and caught her up in a kiss as hot as it was brief. "See?" Before she could comment, his mouth took hers again. Softer now, slower, deeper, with those wonderful hands skimming over her face, along her throat and shoulders.

Every vow she'd made about men and relationships crumbled.

When he eased back, she took a careful breath. "I may end up sleeping with you, but I'm not dating you."

"So I'm good enough to have sex with, but I don't get a candlelit dinner? I feel so cheap."

"Okay. You're funny. That's appealing. I admire your work, and I like your family. I'll think about it."

Saved by the bell, she thought when the timer buzzed. She got off the stool, then wandered to the easel. She saw her face a half-dozen times. Different angles, different expressions. "I thought you were doing a study of me sitting on the stool. You started it, but you've got all these other sketches scattered around it."

"You weren't in the mood to pose today. You had things on your mind, so I worked with them. You said I could have four hours on

Sunday," he reminded her. "I'd like to work outside, weather permitting. I've been by your house. Any objection to working there? It'll be simpler for you. Ten o'clock okay?"

"I suppose."

"Oh, and about the foxgloves. If you bring it back to me, I'll frame it; then you can decide what it's worth in trade. Fair enough?"

"It's down in the shop. I was going to take it to a framer."

"I'll stop down and get it before I leave today." He walked his fingers up her arm. "I could stop by your place later for some quick, cheap sex."

"I don't think so." She strolled to the door, then glanced back at him. "If and when we go there, Seth, I can promise it won't be cheap, and it won't be quick."

After the door closed, he glanced back at the canvas. She was, he decided, quite a number of women rolled up in one fascinating package. Every single one of them appealed to him.

"SOMETHING'S troubling him." Anna paced in the bathroom and talked to Cam's silhouette on the shower curtain.

"He's okay. He's just getting his rhythm back."

"He's not sleeping well. I can tell."

"He's painting," Cam said in exasperation. "He's working at the boatyard; he's catching up with the family. Give him some time."

"Have you noticed what he's not doing? He's not going out with his friends. He's not dating Dru or anyone else. Though it's clear from the way he looks at her there isn't going to be anyone else for the time being." Or ever, she concluded.

"He's downstairs playing video games with Jake," she continued. "On a Friday night. How many weekends did you hang around the house when you were his age?"

Later Cam poked a head in the den where his youngest son and Seth were waged in deadly battle.

Jake let out a triumphant cry. "I *rule,* baby. Bow to the king of Mortal Kombat."

"In your dreams. Let's go again."

"Bow to the king," Jake repeated joyously.

Cam pointed at Seth. "Let's go."

"Where ya going?" Jake demanded, scrambling up. "Can I go?"

"Have you cleaned your room, done your homework, found the cure for cancer, and changed the oil in my car?"

"Come on, Dad," Jake whined.

"Seth, grab some beer and head outside."

"How come I can't go with you guys?" Jake asked.

"I need to talk to Seth."

"What's up?" Seth asked, tossing Cam a beer as they walked toward the back door.

"Gonna take a little sail."

"Now?" Seth looked up at the sky. "It'll be dark in an hour."

"Afraid of the dark?" Cam sauntered to the dock, stepped nimbly into the day sailer. He set the beer aside while Seth cast off.

As he had countless times in the past, Seth lifted the oar to push away from the dock. He hoisted the main, and the sound of the canvas rising was sweet as music. Cam manned the rudder, finessing the wind so they glided, smooth and nearly silent, away from shore.

They motored down the river, through the sound, and into the bay. Seth hoisted the jib and trimmed the sails, and Cam caught the wind. They flew in the wooden boat with its bright work glinting and its sails white as dove's wings. There was salt in the air and the thrilling roll, that rise and fall of waves as deeply blue as the sky.

The speed, the freedom, the absolute joy of skating over the water while the sun went soft toward twilight drained every worry, every doubt, every sorrow from Seth's heart.

For the next fifteen minutes they barely spoke.

When they slowed, Cam stretched out his legs and popped the top on his beer. "So what's going on with you?"

"Going on?"

"Anna's radar tells her something's up with you, and she nagged me into finding out what it is."

Seth bought some time by opening his beer. "I've got a lot on my mind, that's all. She doesn't have to worry."

"I'm supposed to go back and tell her she doesn't have to worry? Oh, yeah, that'll go down real smooth."

"Just tell her I'm thinking about what happens next. I've got to get a place of my own sooner or later. My rep's bugging me about putting together another showing."

"Uh-huh." Cam glanced toward shore and the pretty, old house tucked back on the banks of the river.

When Seth followed the look, he shifted in the bow. He'd had been so wrapped up in the sail, he hadn't noticed the direction.

"Sexy flower queen's not home yet," Cam commented. "I can drop you off here. You can try the I-was-just-in-the-neighborhood gambit."

"That one ever work for you?"

"Ah." Cam let out a wistful sigh, stared up at the sky as if into dreamy memories. "The stories I could tell. She's a tasty morsel."

Amusement fled. "She's not a snack."

"Okay." Having nailed the answer he wanted, Cam nodded. "I wondered if you were really tangled up about her."

Seth hissed out a breath and looked back toward the fanciful blue house tucked among the trees, until it was out of sight. "I can't figure it out. I like being around her. Not that she's easy. Half the time it's like dealing with a porcupine. One in a tiara."

"Women without spines are fine for a one-nighter or a good time. But when you're looking for the long haul . . ."

Shock and panic erupted on Seth's face. "I didn't say that." He adjusted the lines. "Look, I want to paint her. I want to spend some time with her. And I want to get her into bed."

"If you do, maybe you'll start sleeping better."

"Dru doesn't have anything to do with how I'm sleeping."

Cam came about again and headed toward home. Twilight was falling. "So are you going to tell me what's keeping you up at night? If you don't, Anna's going to make both of our lives hell."

He thought of Gloria, and the words crammed in his throat. He could tell Cam anything. Anything but that.

But maybe it was time to unload something else. "I had this really weird dream about Stella."

"Mom? You dreamed about Mom?"

"I know it's weird. I never even met her."

"What were you doing?"

"Sitting on the dock in back of the house, fishing. I could feel the heat of the sun. Then Foolish plops down next to me. I know he's gone—I mean, in the dream I know—so I'm pretty surprised to see him. Next thing I know, Stella's sitting on the dock beside me."

"How did she look?"

It didn't seem like an odd question while they were gliding along on quiet water in the dimming light. "She looked terrific. She had on this old khaki hat, no brim. The kind you just yank down over your head, and her hair was falling all out of it."

Cam remembered the old hat and the way she'd stuffed her unmanageable hair under it. Did they have a picture of her in that ugly cap? He couldn't recall. "What happened in the dream?"

"Not a whole lot. We just sat there and talked. It wasn't what we said so much as how real it seemed. Even when I woke up sitting on the side of the bed, it seemed real. I don't know how to explain it."

"No, I get you." Hadn't he had a number of conversations with his father after Ray had died?

"I always wanted to meet her," Seth continued. "I feel like I have."

"How long ago was this?"

"Last week. You gotta admit, it's a little spooky."

"If you dream about her again, ask her if she remembers the zucchini bread."

"The what?"

"Just ask her," Cam said as they drifted home.

"MOM?" In the office of the boatyard Phillip sat heavily in his chair. "He dreamed about Mom?"

"Maybe it was a dream, maybe it wasn't."

Ethan rubbed his chin. "He said she was wearing that old cap?"

"That's right."

"She wore it often enough," Phillip pointed out. "He's probably seen a picture of her wearing it."

"She's not wearing it in any of the pictures we've got sitting around our place." Cam had looked. "I'm not saying he hasn't seen a picture, and I'm not saying it wasn't just a dream. But it's odd. She used to come down and sit on the dock with us like that. She didn't care much for fishing, but if one of us was sitting out there brooding over something, she'd come out and sit until we started talking about whatever it was we had in our craw."

"She was good at it," Ethan agreed. "Good at getting down to the meat of it."

"I know this. Something's bothering the kid, and he doesn't want to talk about it. If anybody can get it out of him, it's Mom. Even in a dream. In the meantime, I guess we just watch him. I'm going down before he figures out we're up here talking about him."

Cam started out, then stopped and turned back. "I told him if he dreams about her again, to ask her about the zucchini bread."

Both his brothers looked blank. Ethan remembered first and laughed so hard he had to sit on the edge of the desk.

Phillip eased back in his chair. "I'd forgotten all about that."

"We'll see if she remembers," Cam said, then started down into the din of the work area. He'd gotten to the last step when the outer door opened, spilling in sunshine just ahead of Dru.

"Well hello, gorgeous. Looking for my idiot brother?"

"Which idiot brother?"

His grin was pure appreciation. "You catch on. Seth's earning his keep."

"Actually, I wasn't—" But Cam already had her hand and was leading her along.

Legs spread, his back to her, Seth stood on the decking of the boat, stripped to the waist. His back and arms showed considerably more muscle than might be expected from a man who wielded a paintbrush for a living. He guzzled from a bottle of water. Her own mouth went dry watching him.

Shallow, Dru told herself. Shallow to be interested in a man simply because he looked hot and hard and handsome.

He reached up to swipe his brow with his forearm, then spotted

her. Now her senses were assaulted by the lethal power of his smile.

She saw his mouth move, but the words he spoke were drowned out by the music. Cam walked over and turned the stereo down to merely loud.

"Hey!" Aubrey's head popped up from under the deck. "What gives?"

"We've got company."

Seth jumped down from the deck. "We're on for tomorrow, right?" he asked Dru as he walked over, pulling a bandanna out of his pocket to wipe his hands and face.

"Yes." Dru noted that Aubrey continued to watch them. "I didn't mean to interrupt your work. I was running some errands, and I thought I'd come in and have a look at the operation here."

"I'll show you around."

"You're busy." And your blond companion is watching me like your guard dog, Dru decided. "In any case, I'm told it's probably you I want to see," she said to Cam.

Cam gestured at Seth. "I told you that's what all the pretty ladies say. What can I do for you?"

"I want to buy a boat."

"Is that so?" Cam draped an arm around her shoulders and led her toward the stairs. "Well, sugar, you've come to the right place."

"Hey!" Seth called out. "I can talk about boats."

"Junior partner. We try to humor him. So what kind of boat are you interested in?"

"Sloop. Eighteen feet. Arc bottom, cedar hull. Probably a spoon bow, though I'd be flexible if the designer has another idea. I want something with good balance, reliable stability, but when I want to move, I want to move."

She turned to study the gallery of sketches. "This hull, this bow," she said, gesturing to two sketches. "I want something quick to the wind, and I want a boat that lasts."

She obviously knew her boats. "A custom job like that's going to cost you," Cam said.

"I don't expect it comes free, but I don't discuss terms with you,

do I? I believe that's your brother Phillip's area—and if there are any other specific design details, that would be Ethan's."

"Done your homework."

"I like to know who I'm dealing with, and I prefer dealing with the best. That, by all accounts, is Quinn Brothers. How soon can you work up a design?"

Man, oh man, Cam thought, you're going to drive the kid crazy. And it's going to be fun to watch. "Let's go upstairs, and we'll figure it out."

IT WAS Ethan who walked her down and out thirty minutes later.

"We'll have a draft of the design drawn up by the end of next week," he told her. "Sooner if we can browbeat Seth into doing most of it."

"Oh?" She sent what she hoped was a casual glance toward the work area. "Does he do some of the designing?"

"When we can pin him down. Always had a knack. Pretty obvious he draws better than the three of us put together." Ethan offered her his hand. "It's going to be a pleasure doing business with you."

"Likewise."

He showed her out, then wandered into the driving beat of Sugar Ray and power sanders. He was halfway to the lathe when Seth shut off his tool.

"Dru up with the guys?"

"Nope. She went on."

"Went on? Well, damn it, you could've said something." He vaulted down from the boat and sprinted for the door.

Aubrey frowned after him. "He's half stuck on her already."

"Seems like." Ethan tilted his head at the look on her face. "Problem?"

"I don't know." She shrugged. "She's just not what I pictured for him, that's all. She's all kind of stiff if you ask me."

"Not everybody's as easy with people as you are. Besides the fact, it's what Seth pictures that matters."

"Yeah." But she was far from sold on Drusilla.

Seven

HE HADN'T told her what to wear for the sitting, so Dru settled on the simple—blue cotton pants and a white camp shirt.

She heard his tires crunch on her gravel drive and waited for him to knock. All right, she thought, so she did feel a rush of heat the minute she opened the door and looked at him. It only proved that she was human and she was healthy.

"Good morning," she said as she stepped back to let him inside.

"Morning. I love this place. I just realized that if you hadn't snapped it up before I got back home, I would have."

"You said you wanted to work outside."

"Yeah. Oh, hey, your painting." He shifted the package wrapped in brown paper under his arm and handed it to her. "I'll hang it for you if you've picked your spot."

"That was quick." And because she couldn't resist, she sat on the sofa and ripped off the wrapping.

He'd chosen thin strips of wood stained a dull gold that complemented the rich tones of the flowers and foliage so that the frame was as simple and strong as the painting.

"It's perfect. Thank you. And I'd take you up on hanging it for me because I'm dying to see how it looks, but I don't have the proper hanger."

"Like this?" He dug one he'd brought with him out of his pocket.

"Like that."

"Got a hammer and a tape measure?"

"I happen to have a hammer." She rose, went into the kitchen, and came back with a hammer so new it gleamed.

"Where do you want it?"

"Upstairs. My bedroom." She turned to lead the way. "What's in the bag?"

"Stuff. The guy who rehabbed this place knew what he was doing." Seth examined the satin finish on the banister as they climbed to the second floor. "How many bedrooms? Three?"

"Four, though one's quite small, more suited to a home office or a little library."

She turned into a room, and Seth saw immediately that the windows gave her a view of the river, a sweep of trees, and shady garden. She'd gone for cerulean blue on the walls, scattered a couple floral rugs on the pine floor, and had antiques for furnishings.

The bed was tidily made, as he'd expected, and covered with a white quilt with intricate interlocking rings and rosebuds that seemed to have been crafted specifically for the sleigh bed.

"I thought the wall between these windows. It'll be good light without direct sun."

"Good choice." He held the painting up. "And it'll be like another window, so you'll have flowers during the winter."

Her thoughts, Dru admitted, exactly.

"About here?"

She checked the position from different angles. "That's perfect."

"See what you think about what's in the bag," he said without looking around.

She opened it. Her eyebrows lifted high as she took out a long, filmy skirt—purple pansies rioting against a blue background—and a thin-strapped narrow top in the same shade of blue.

"It'll look good on you, and it's the look I'm after."

"And you get what you're after."

He glanced back now. "So far."

She laid the skirt and top on the bed, then stepped back as he fixed the painting on its hook. "Painted, framed, and hung by Quinn. Not a bad deal on my side."

The phone rang. "Excuse me." She picked up the bedside phone. "Hello?"

"Hello, princess."

"Dad. Why aren't you on the seventh green by this time on a Sunday morning?"

"I've got some difficult news." Proctor let out a long sigh. "Sweetheart, your mother and I are getting divorced."

"I see." The pulse in her temple began to throb. She pushed the HOLD button and turned to Seth. "I'm sorry, I need to take this. There's coffee in the kitchen. I shouldn't be long."

"Okay. I'll grab a cup before I go out to set up. Take your time."

She waited until she heard him start down the steps, then sat on the side of the bed and reconnected with her father. "I'm sorry, Dad. What happened?"

"I'm afraid your mother and I haven't been getting along for quite a while. I've tried to shield you from our problems. I have no doubt we'd have taken this step years ago if it hadn't been for you."

"I'm very sorry. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"It's too complicated to discuss on the phone. Why don't you come up this afternoon. We'll have lunch. Nothing would brighten my day more than spending it with my little girl."

"I'm sorry. I've got a commitment today."

"Surely, under the circumstances, this is more important."

Guilt roiled in her stomach. "I can't break this engagement."

"That's all right," he said in a voice that managed to be both long-suffering and brisk. "I'd hoped you'd have some time for me."

"I'm sorry, Dad." She lost track of the times she echoed that phrase during the rest of the conversation.

No sooner had she set the phone down than it rang again. Thirty years, Dru thought, might account for the sixth sense her parents had in regard to each other. Resigned, she picked up the phone. "Hello, Mom."

HE'D spread a red blanket on the grass near the river where there were both beams of sunlight and dappled shade. He added a wicker picnic basket, propping an open bottle of wine and a stemmed glass against it. A slim book with a ragged white cover lay beside it.

She'd changed into the clothes he'd brought. "Sorry I held you up," she said as she stepped off the porch.

"No problem." One look at her face had him crossing to her. He

put his arms around her and, ignoring her flinch, held her gently. "You look sad." He brushed his lips over her hair. "You want to do this some other time?"

"No. It's nothing, really. Just habitual family insanity."

"I'm good at that. An expert on family insanity."

"My parents are getting divorced."

"Oh, baby." He touched her cheek. "I'm sorry."

"No, no, no." To his bafflement she laughed. "You don't get it. They whack the D word around like a Ping-Pong ball. Every couple of years I get the call. 'Dru, I have difficult news.' Or 'Dru, I'm not sure how to tell you.' "

"Sounds more like you've been the Ping-Pong ball."

"They love me too much," she said quietly. "Or not enough. I've never been able to figure it out. I don't suppose they have either. And I have absolutely no business dumping my mess in your lap."

"Why not? We're practically going steady."

She let out a half laugh.

"Why don't we toss this for today and go for a sail?"

"No. You're already set up. But thanks, really, Seth."

He nodded. "Okay. First, lose the shoes."

She stepped out of the canvas slides. "A barefoot picnic."

"There you go. Lie down on the blanket."

She'd assumed she'd be sitting on it, skirts spread as she read the book. But she stepped onto the blanket. "Faceup or -down?"

"On your back. Scoot down more," he suggested. "Let's have the right arm over your head and bend your elbow." He knelt down and pulled up her skirt so it exposed her left leg to mid-thigh.

"Aren't you supposed to say something about how you're not hitting on me but that this is all for the sake of art?"

"It is for the sake of art." The back of his fingers skimmed her thigh as he fussed with the lie of the material. "But I'm hitting on you, too." He slid the strap of her top off her shoulder, studied the result, nodded. "Turn your head toward me."

She did and glanced over the paint supplies. "Aren't those watercolors? I thought you said you wanted oil."

"This one's for watercolors. You're having a quiet afternoon by the water," he told her as he began sketching lightly. "A little sleepy from wine and reading."

"Am I alone?"

"For the moment. You're just daydreaming now."

She did as he asked.

"What do you think of when you paint?" she asked him.

"Think? I don't know. Shape, I guess. Light, shadow, mood. I don't have an answer."

"You just answered the question I didn't ask. Your talent is instinctive. It has to be, as you were so clever at drawing so young."

"What did you want to do when you were a kid?"

"Lots of things. A ballerina, a movie star, an explorer. What I didn't think I'd be was a businesswoman."

"But you like it."

"I love it. I love being able to take what I once assumed was a personal passion and a small talent for flowers and do something with it." Her mind began to drift. "I've never been able to talk to anyone the way I seem to be able to talk to you."

"No kidding?" She looked like a faerie queen—the exotic shape of her eyes, the sexy pixie cap of dark hair. A faerie queen drowsing alone in her private glade. Mood. "Why do you think that is?"

"I haven't a clue." And with a sigh she fell asleep.

SHE opened her eyes. Embarrassed, she rose on one elbow. "I'm sorry."

"No need to be sorry. You gave me just what I was after."

She looked over at the easel. "You finished?"

"No, but I got a hell of a start. My stomach's telling me it's lunchtime." He flipped the lid on a cooler. "We've got bread, cheese, grapes, some pâté Phil swears by." He pulled out plates as he spoke. "And though I had to debase myself and beg, some of Anna's pasta salad. And this terrific wine I discovered in Venice."

"You're trying to make this a date," she said warily.

"Too late." He poured the first glass, handed it to her. "It already

is a date. I wanted to ask why you took off so fast yesterday when you came by the boatyard."

"I'd finished my business." She chose a chilled grape, bit through its tart skin. "And I had to get back to work."

"So you want a boat?"

"Yes, I do. I like to sail."

"Come sailing with me. That way you can check out how seaworthy a boat by Quinn is."

"I'll think about it.""

She sampled the pâté. "Your brother Phillip has excellent taste. They're very different, your brothers. Yet they hang together like a single unit."

"That's family."

"Is it? No, not always—not even usually, at least in my experience. Yours is unique. Why aren't you scarred?"

He looked up from scooping out pasta salad. "Sorry?"

"There's been enough information dribbled through the stories I've read about you, and what I've heard just living in St. Chris, to tell me you had a very hard childhood. You told me so yourself. How do you get through that without being damaged?"

"They saved me." He said it with a simple honesty. "Ray Quinn, then Cam and Ethan and Phil. They turned their world around for me and, because of it, turned mine around with it. They made a home for me, and nothing that happened before matters nearly as much as everything that came after."

Unspeakably moved, she leaned forward and touched her lips to his. "You're a good man. I don't know just what to do with you."

"You could start by trusting me."

"No. Nothing starts with trust. Trust develops."

"I can probably guarantee I'm nothing like the guy you were engaged to." When her body went rigid, he shrugged. "I'm not the only one who gets written about or talked about."

"No, you're nothing like Jonah. We never had a picnic with his sister's pasta salad."

"Dinner at Jean-Louis at the Watergate or whatever tony French

place is currently in fashion. Openings at the Kennedy Center. Clever cocktail parties and the occasional Sunday afternoon brunch with copacetic friends." He waited a beat. "How'd I do?"

"Close enough."

"Did you love him?"

She found herself answering with complete honesty. "I don't know anymore. I believed I did or I'd never have planned to marry him. He was attractive, brilliant, had a deadly sarcasm, and, as it turned out, the fidelity of an alley cat. Better I found that out before we were married than after. I started to flush my three-carat, square-cut, Russian white diamond engagement ring down the toilet, but sanity prevailed."

"What did you do with it?"

"I put it in an envelope, wrote 'For His Sins' on the front, then dropped it into the collection box at a little church in Georgetown. Overdramatic but satisfying."

Seth leaned over, touched his lips to hers. "Nice job, champ."

"Yes. I thought so." She brought her knees up, sipped her wine while she looked out over the water. "A number of my acquaintances think I left D.C. and moved here because of Jonah. They're wrong. I've loved it here since that first time we came with my grandfather. When I knew I had to make the break, start fresh, I tried to imagine myself living in different places. But I always came back here in my head. It wasn't impulsive. I planned it for years. That's how I do things—plan them out, step by step."

She paused, studied him, sipped wine. "You listen. That's a gift. And a weapon."

"I'm not going to hurt you." Shifting, he framed her face with his hands to lift it until their lips met.

She tasted of the wine that spilled unnoticed when her hand went limp on the glass.

He laid her back on the blanket, sliding down with her as her arms linked around his neck.

Heat flashed through her, urging her to give and to take. Instead, she pressed a hand to his shoulder. "Wait, Seth."

He bit off an oath, rested his forehead on hers while his blood raged. "Okay. Okay," he managed. "Why?"

"I didn't intend for this to happen, and I'm not going to make love with a man who appears to be involved with someone else."

"Involved with who? Dru, I just got back home, and I haven't looked at another woman since the first time I saw you."

"You've been involved with this one long before you saw me." He looked blank. She stayed firm. "Aubrey."

"What about Aubrey?" It took him several jolting seconds to understand her meaning. "*Aubrey?*"

"I'm not blind."

He sat back. "It's not like that. Dru, she's my sister."

"No, she isn't."

"Niece."

"Nor is she that. And maybe you are oblivious to what's between you, but I doubt very much she is."

"I don't think about her that way. Neither does she."

Dru smoothed down her skirt. "Are you certain?"

"Yeah." But the seed had been planted.

"What I think," Dru said calmly, "is that I'm not going to have an affair with a man who I suspect is attracted to someone else. Maybe you should work this out with Aubrey before anything goes any further between us. But for now I think we'd better call it a day."

She began to pack the cooler. "Assuming you want one, I should be able to give you some time for another sitting next Sunday."

He stood, stared down at her. "You're a case. Some jerk cheats on you, so that means we're all cheats?"

"No. In fact, I think you're as honest as they come. But as I said, I'm not ready to take this step with you, and I have reservations over your feelings toward someone else."

"Sounds like instead of you asking me about scars, I should've asked you." He turned his back on her to pack up his gear.

More shaken than she wanted to admit, Dru made herself walk slowly into the house.

It was, she admitted, still a retreat.

WOMEN. SETH TOSSED THE cooler into the trunk of the car, heaved the hamper in behind it, then stomped back for his canvas.

"I ought to know who I'm attracted to," he said to himself as he lifted the painting-in-progress and carried it to the car. "One guy turns out to be a putz and damns us all?" He laid the canvas on the blanket, scowled at it. "We'll just settle this thing once and for all."

Minutes later he pulled up in the drive at Aubrey's, leaped out of the car, and strode to the door.

"Aubrey?" he shouted up the stairs. "Anyone home?"

"Seth?" Grace hurried in from the kitchen.

"I just dropped by to see Aubrey. Is she around?"

"She plays softball Sunday afternoons."

"Right." Seth scowled.

It was the bottom of the eighth, with two on, two out, when Seth arrived at the park. Aubrey's team, the Blue Crabs, was down by a run to their longtime nemesis, the Rockfish.

Spectators munched on hot dogs, slurped cold drinks from paper cups, and hurled the expected insults or encouragements at the players. June was coming on with her usual hot breath and moist hands, making spring a fond memory. Sun poured onto the field and drenched it in heat and humidity.

Steam from the concession stand pumped out as Seth passed it to clamber up the stands. He noted that Aubrey was on deck as the current batter took ball three. When ball four was called, the crowd erupted. "Aub-*rey!* Aub-*rey!*" as she swaggered to the plate.

She scuffed at the plate. She took a couple of testing swings and took a hard cut at the first pitch. She jogged back to the plate as the ball curved foul. The chant rose again, and feet began to stomp on wood until the bleachers vibrated.

Seth knew the minute the ball met her bat that it was gone. The crowd was on its feet, an eruption of sound as Aubrey tossed her bat aside and jogged around the bases.

The Rockfish went scoreless in the ninth, shut down on a strike-out and a spiffy double play started by Aubrey at short. Seth wandered down toward the dugout.

"Nice game, Slugger."

"Hey"—Aubrey sauntered over to Seth—"I thought you were painting the flower girl today."

"Yeah, well, we had a sitting. Listen, I need to talk to you."

"Okay. I'll catch a lift home with you."

"Good. Great. I'll meet you at the car."

He shifted the blanket and canvas to the back seat. When Aubrey walked toward him—a mitt in her hand, a bat over her shoulder—he tried to look at her the way he would if he'd never met her before. But it just wouldn't work.

"You're starting to get me worried, Seth," she said.

"Don't. Here, let me put those in the trunk."

She shrugged, passed off her ball gear, but her face registered surprise when he opened the car door for her. "We in a hurry?"

"Just because you hit grand slams doesn't mean a guy shouldn't open the door for you. If Will doesn't treat you with some respect, you ought to ditch him."

"Will treats me just fine. What are you in such a lather about?"

"I don't want to talk about it yet." He started to drive.

She let him have silence. She knew him well enough to understand that when he had something in his craw, he went quiet.

He pulled into the boatyard, sat tapping his hands on the steering wheel for a moment. "Let's walk around to the dock, okay?"

"Sure."

But when he got out, she continued to sit until he came around and wrenched the door open.

"What're you doing?"

"Merely waiting for you to treat me with the proper respect." She fluttered her lashes and, laughing at him, slid out of the car. "What's up, Seth?" She unwrapped a stick of gum.

"I need to ask you for a favor."

She folded the gum into her mouth. "What do you need?"

He stepped onto the dock, stared out at the water and at the osprey nesting on a post before he turned back. "I need to kiss you."

She lifted her palms. "That's it? I was wondering if you had six

months to live or something. Okay. You've kissed me hundreds of times. What's the big deal?"

"I need to settle something, so I need to kiss you. Like a regular guy would."

"Seth"—she patted his arm—"this is weird."

"I know it's weird," he shot back. "Dru has this idea that I . . . that we . . . That I'm attracted to you in a guy way. And vice versa."

Aubrey blinked twice, slow as an owl. "She thinks I've got the hots for you?"

"More or less," he muttered. "She put this damn idea in my head. I can't work it back out again. What if she's right?"

There was a laugh burbling in her throat. "Get real, Seth."

"Look, it's not going to kill you to kiss me."

"Okay, okay. Go ahead."

"Okay." He started to lower his head.

A fit of giggles forced Aubrey to move back. He stood, scowling, until she controlled herself. Conscientiously she took the gum out of her mouth, folded it into the old wrapper. She put her arms around him. They stayed locked, the breeze off the water fluttering over them. Their eyes met, and they began to laugh.

Still holding each other, they rocked in whooping hilarity. He lowered his forehead to hers on a relieved breath. "So." She gave his butt a friendly pinch. "You want me, don't you?"

"Shut up, Aubrey."

He gave her a fierce hug before he eased back. "Thanks."

"No problem."

"You're not going to tell anybody about this, right?"

"Are you kidding?"

"WHAT are you calling it?" Stella asked him.

They were standing in front of the painting, studying it in the glare of his studio lights. "I don't know. I haven't thought about it."

There was a vibrancy to the colors—the green of the grass and leaves, the shock of red from the blanket, and the milky white of her skin against it. The garden of flowers on her skirt was bold, a

contrast to the delicate way the material draped high on her thigh.

"Beauty Sleeps," Stella suggested.

She was wearing an oversize chambray shirt and baggy jeans, with flat canvas shoes that looked as though they'd walked a lot of miles. And when she tucked her arm through Seth's, he could smell hints of lemon from her shampoo.

"We're proud of you, Seth. Not for the talent so much. That's God-given. But for being true to what you have and what you are."

"Cam said I should ask you about the zucchini bread."

"He did, did he? Well, I wasn't much of a cook. But one day in the fall I got a yen for zucchini bread. We'd planted the stuff, and we had more than we could eat in six years. So I got out the cookbook and tried my hand at baking some. Four loaves from scratch, and I set them on a rack to cool. I was damn proud of that bread."

She paused. "About a half hour later I walked back into the kitchen. Instead of four loaves, there were just three. My first thought was, Well, those boys have been in here and helped themselves. Felt pretty smug until I looked out the kitchen window. What do you think I saw?"

"I've got no clue."

"My boys and my loving husband out in the yard using the zucchini bread as a football. I was out that door like a shot, gonna skin the lot of them. About that time, Phil heaved that loaf high and hard, Ethan loped over to receive, and Cam leaped up to intercept. Misjudged, though. The loaf caught him right about here." She tapped her brow. "Knocked him flat. Damn thing was hard as a brick."

She laughed, rocking back and forth on her heels as if her humor had weight. "By the time I got to Cam to check him out and give them a piece of my mind, he'd shaken it off and the four of them were howling like loons. They called it the Bread Bowl. Last time I ever baked bread, I'll tell you that. I sure do miss those days."

"I wish I'd had time with you and Ray."

She brushed at the stray tendrils of hair that had fallen over his forehead. The gesture was so tender it made his heart ache.

"Is it okay if I call you Grandma?"

"Of course it is, sweet boy," Stella murmured. "She couldn't cut that sweet heart out of you no matter how hard she tried. That's why hurting you's always been so easy for her."

They weren't talking about Dru now, he thought. But about Gloria. "I don't want to think about her. She can't hurt me anymore."

"Can't she? Trouble's coming. You be strong, you be smart, and you be true. You're not alone, Seth. You'll never be alone."

But when he woke with the early sunlight just sliding through his windows, it seemed he was. Worse, he saw the folded note under the door. He forced himself to walk over and pick it up.

> Lucy's Diner, next to the By-Way Hotel on Route 13.
> Eleven o'clock tonight. Make sure it's in cash.

Eight

AUBREY stewed about it, picked it apart, and put it together again. And the more she fumed and fiddled, the madder she got. Drusilla Whitcomb Banks needed a talk, and Aubrey Quinn was just the one to give it to her. She'd worked up quite a head of steam by the time she left the boatyard at five o'clock.

She practiced what she intended to say as she drove into town. The keen-edged slice of words that would cut Little Miss Perfect down to size. No one got away with making Seth unhappy. Mess with one Quinn, she thought as she scooted her pickup into a space at the curb, mess with them all. In her work boots, dirty T-shirt, and well-sprung jeans she marched into Bud and Bloom.

Yeah, she was perfect, all right, Aubrey thought, and bit down on her ire while Dru wrapped a bunch of daisies. Just perfect in her pink silk blouse and wood-nymph hair. The slacks were stone gray and fluid. Probably silk, too, Aubrey thought, annoyed with herself for admiring the classy, casual look.

Dru's gaze shifted up and over as the door opened. What might have been polite warmth chilled into caution when Aubrey glared at her.

"I don't think you're in the market for flowers," Dru said. "What can I do for you?"

"You can stop screwing with Seth's brain and putting me in the role of the other woman."

"Actually, I was worried that was my role."

"What's wrong with you? He'd never move on you if he was moving on someone else. What do you take him for? He's not like that. And you're stupid for saying that 'buxom blonde in black' remark."

Dru winced, but she kept her voice even. "A stupid comment doesn't make me stupid. But it was uncalled for. I apologize."

"Apology accepted," Aubrey said. "But that doesn't cover the bases regarding Seth. You want to know what we are to each other?" Aubrey leaned on the counter. "We're family. And if you don't know family loves each other and sticks up for each other, then I'm sorry for you. And I'm not sure you're good for him."

"Neither am I," Dru said, stopping Aubrey in her tracks.

"I just don't get you," Aubrey admitted. "But I get Seth. He already cares about you. You hurt him yesterday."

Dru looked down. "Let me ask you something. If you found yourself getting involved with a man and you see that man has a relationship with another woman—a really attractive, vibrant, interesting woman—and all you can see is that it's special and beyond your scope, how would you feel?"

Aubrey had to take a moment before she answered. "I don't know. Dru, I love him, but it's not sexual or romantic or anything like that. He's my best friend. He's my brother. He's my Seth."

"I never had a best friend or a brother. Maybe that's why it's hard for me to understand."

"You'd have gotten a clue if you'd seen the two of us cracking up after kissing yesterday." Aubrey's lips twitched. "That's Seth for you. You planted that seed, and so he worries over it. So he tracks me down, tells me he needs to kiss me—a real guy-girl smackeroo—so

we can make sure there's nothing going on in that direction. Then we laughed ourselves silly, and we're fine. I wasn't going to tell you that part," Aubrey added. "But since you said I was attractive and vibrant and interesting, I'm cutting you a break."

"Thanks. And I'm sorry, Aubrey." It was always a terrifying thing for Dru to go with impulse. "I don't make friends easily. It's not one of my skills. I'm terrific at making acquaintances." She took a long breath. "I'm going to close a little early today. Are you in a hurry, or would you like to go have a drink?"

Seth was a goner, Aubrey realized. He'd never hold out against those hints of vulnerability and need hiding under the polish. "Got any good wine at your place?"

"Yes"—Dru's lips curved—"I do."

It wasn't so hard to make a friend after all, Dru realized.

SETH sat on the sun-faded red vinyl of the booth in the very back of the diner. Gloria wasn't there. She would be late. It was just another way for her to show she had the upper hand. The ten thousand in cash was in an old canvas bag on the seat beside him.

There was a man with shoulders wide as Montana sitting on a stool at the counter. He ate apple pie à la mode with the concentration of a surgeon performing a tricky operation. Behind the counter the waitress wore candy pink with her name stitched in white over the right breast. She picked up a pot of coffee, breezed up to the pie eater, and stood, hip-cocked, as she topped off his cup.

Seth's fingers itched for his sketch pad.

Then Gloria walked in, and the painting faded away.

She'd gone beyond thin. He could see the blades of her hips jutting against the tight red pants. Her hair was bleached a blond that was nearly white, cut short and spiky, accenting her thin face. The lines had dug deep around her mouth. She hadn't yet hit fifty, he calculated, but looked as though she'd been dragged facefirst over it some time before.

She slid in across from him. "Your hair was longer last time," she

said, then shifted to flash her teeth at the waitress. "What kind of pie you got tonight?"

"Apple, cherry, lemon meringue."

"I'll have a slice of cherry with vanilla ice cream. How about you, Seth honey?"

Her voice, just her voice, set his teeth on edge. "No."

"Suit yourself. I'll have coffee, too." She leaned back. "Well now, I figured you'd stay over in Europe. Guess you got homesick. And how are all the happy Quinns these days?"

Seth lifted the bag from the seat beside him. But when she reached out, he closed his fist around it. "You take it, and you go. You make a move toward anyone in my family, you'll pay."

"That's a hell of a way to talk to your mother."

"You're not my mother." He unzipped the bag, tilted it so she could see the contents. "There's your payment. You stay away from me and mine."

"Think you're a big shot now, don't you? You're nothing."

Seth rose, took ten dollars out of his wallet, and tossed it on the table. "Maybe I am, but I'm still better than you."

She snatched the bag, tucked it against her hip on the seat as he walked out. Down payment, she mused. Enough to tide her over for a few weeks while she worked out the rest.

She wasn't done with Seth. Not by a long shot.

HE BURROWED in his studio. He used painting as an escape, a channel for his frustration. He knew his family was worried about him. He'd barely seen them—or anyone else—for three days. He hadn't been able to go back to them after leaving Gloria.

He'd hauled the big canvas up from storage, and he'd painted what he felt. The messy mix of emotions and images took shape. He painted as if his life depended on it.

That's what Dru thought as she stood in the doorway gripping the vase she carried. It was a battle between life and death, between sanity and despair, waged with a brush.

He had one in his hand, stabbed at the canvas, sliced at it.

Another was clamped between his teeth, like a weapon in reserve. Music boomed, a violent guitar riff that was like a battle cry. Paint was splattered on his shirt, his jeans, his shoes. Her floor.

To see him like this was compelling, intimate, oddly erotic.

So she watched as he whipped at the canvas. Bold, almost vicious strokes, then delicate ones that seemed to hold a kind of contained fury. This was labor, and not all for love.

When he stepped back from the canvas, she thought he stared at it as if it had appeared out of thin air. The hand that held the brush fell to his side. He took the one he'd clamped between his teeth, set it aside, then rubbed absently at the muscles of his right arm.

She started to ease back now, but he turned, peered at her like a man coming out of a trance. Since she'd missed her chance to leave unnoticed, she did the only thing she could think of. She walked in.

"I'm sorry. You didn't hear me knock." She didn't look at the painting. "I've interrupted your work."

"No. I think it's finished. What do you think?"

It was a storm at sea. Brutal, savage, and somehow alive. She could hear the wind screaming, feel the terror of the man who alone fought a desperate battle to keep his boat from being swallowed by towering walls of waves. But in the distance there was land and light. There was home. He was fighting his way home.

"It's powerful," she managed. "And painful. You don't show his face. That's the point, isn't it? So we look and see what we'd feel if we were the one fighting our demons alone."

"Don't you wonder if he'll win?"

"I know he will because he has to get home. They're waiting for him. How long have you been working on this?"

"I don't know. What day is it?"

"That long. Then I imagine you want to get home and get some rest." She picked up the vase of flowers she'd set beside his stereo. She held it out. "A peace offering."

It was a mix of blooms in a blue vase. "Thanks. It's nice."

"I was wrong. I very rarely am. And when I am, I like to admit it, apologize, and move on."

"Okay. Why don't you tell me what you were wrong about?"

"About you and Aubrey. Not only wrong about your relationship but wrong to make an issue out of your personal business."

"Huh. So you were wrong twice."

"No. That equals one mistake with two parts, and I am sorry."

He set the flowers down. "How do you know you were wrong?"

"Aubrey stopped by the shop the other day and explained things to me very clearly. Then we had some wine at my place."

"Back up. I explain things to you, and you kick me out. Aub explains things to you, and everything's peachy?"

"Yes."

"I don't know why," he said. "I can't put my finger on it, but that pisses me off again. I want a beer. Do you want a beer?"

"Does that mean you accept my apology?"

"I'm thinking about it," he called back from the kitchen.

She accepted the bottle he handed her when he came back in.

"How about we order some pizza, because I'm starving. And I'd like to spend some time with you. You hungry?"

"Well, I—"

"Good. Where's that phone?" He finally dug the phone out from under a pillow on the bed. "Hi, it's Seth Quinn. . . . Yeah, I'm good. How about you? . . . You bet. I want a large, loaded."

"No," Dru said, and had him frowning over at her.

"Hold it a minute," he said into the phone. "No what?"

"No toppings."

"No toppings?" He gaped at her. "*None?* What are you, sick?" He huffed out a breath. "Okay, make that half totally boring and half loaded. . . . Yeah, you got it. . . . At my place over the flower shop."

He disconnected, then tossed the phone back on the bed. "Won't take long. Look, I'm going to grab a shower."

"Can I look at some of your other paintings?"

"Sure. Go ahead."

And just like that, she realized, they were back on even ground. Or as even as it ever had been.

She moved over to the canvas propped on the easel by the front windows. The breath caught in her throat. She supposed it was a typical reaction for someone seeing themselves as a painting. Surely it was finished, because it was perfect. Perfectly beautiful.

He'd made her beautiful, she thought. Desirable, she supposed, and still aloof, because it was so clear that she wished to be alone. How could anyone understand a man who was capable of creating something so lovely and dreamy on one canvas and something as passionate and fierce on another?

She wandered to the stacks of canvases, sat on the floor, and began to learn. Sun-washed scenes of Florence with red-tiled roofs, golden buildings, crooked cobbled streets. An empty road winding through luminous green fields. A field of sunflowers baking in heat that was almost palpable—and the laughing face of a young girl running through them trailing a red balloon behind her.

She saw joy and romance, sorrow and whimsy, desire and despair. *He* saw, she corrected. He saw everything.

When he came back from the shower, she was sitting on the floor, a painting in her lap.

He crossed over, picked up the bottle. "How about wine instead?"

"It doesn't matter." She couldn't take her attention away from the painting. It was another watercolor, one he'd done from memory on a rainy day in Italy. He'd been homesick and restless. So he'd painted the marsh he'd explored as a boy, with its tangle of gum and oak trees, with its luminous light trapped in dawn.

"That spot's not far from the house," he told her.

"Will you sell it to me?"

"You keep coming up here, I'm not going to need an agent. Did you see your portrait?"

"Yes. It's lovely. What will you call it?"

"Beauty Sleeps," he said, then frowned as the dream came back to him. "Zucchini football," he muttered.

"Excuse me?"

"Nothing. Just a weird flash. Pizza," he said at the brisk knock. He snatched his wallet off the workbench and went to the door. "Hey, Mike, how's it going?"

"Hanging loose."

The skinny, pimply faced teenager handed Seth the pizza box.

"Great. Here you go, Mike. Keep the change."

"I'll get you a glass of very nice chianti instead of the beer," Seth said as he booted the door closed.

"I can drink the beer."

"You could," he commented. "But you'd rather have the wine. I'll drink the beer."

She sat on the bed and worked a slice free of the pie.

"You know, we've been dating for a while now," he said, returning from the kitchen with paper plates.

"We are not dating. This is not a date. This is a pizza."

"Right. Anyway." He sat down, cross-legged, his shirt carelessly unbuttoned. "We haven't asked some of the essential questions to make sure this relationship has a chance."

"Such as?"

"Vacation weekend. The mountains or the shore?"

"Mountains. We live at the shore."

"Agreed." He bit into the pizza. "Favorite guitar player. Eric Clapton or Chet Atkins?"

"Chet who?"

He actually went pale. "Let's skip that one. It's too painful. Scariest movie ever—classic category, *Psycho* or *Jaws?*"

"Neither. *The Exorcist.*"

"Good one. Who would you trust with your life against the forces of evil? Superman or Batman?"

"Buffy the Vampire Slayer."

"Get out. Superman. It *has* to be Superman."

"Buffy has a much more interesting wardrobe."

He shook his head in disgust. "Shower or bath?"

"Bath." She licked sauce off her finger. "Long, hot, and full of bubbles."

"Just as I suspected. Dog or cat?"

"Cat."

He set the slice down. "That is just so wrong."

"Cats are self-reliant, and they don't chew your shoes."

He shook his head in deep regret. "This might be the end of things between us. Quick. French fries or caviar?"

"Really, that's ridiculous. French fries, of course."

"Do you mean it?" As if hope had sprung giddily into his heart, he grabbed her hand in a tight grip. "You're not just saying that to string me along so you can have your way with me?"

"Caviar is hardly an essential element of life."

He gave her hand a loud kiss, then went back to eating. "Other than a woeful ignorance of music and poor judgment over pets, you did really well. I'll sleep with you."

"I don't know what to say. I'm so touched."

"Drusilla—" He broke off when his cell phone rang.

"Go ahead. I'll put this away for you."

She gathered the pizza box and the plates while he flipped on the phone. "Yeah? . . . No, I'm okay. I was distracted. . . . Anna, I'm fine. I finished the painting I was working on. I just had pizza with Dru. . . . Uh-huh. Sure. I'll be home tomorrow. . . . I love you, too." He hung up as Dru came back in. "Anna."

"Yes. I heard." She walked to the door. Locked it. She crossed to him. "The last time I went to bed with a man, it was a humiliating experience for me. That's been nearly two years ago now. It's very possible, on some level, I'm using you to take back something I feel someone else took from me."

Since he was still sitting cross-legged on the bed, she slid onto his lap, hooked her arms around his neck. "Do you mind?"

"I can't say I do." He ran his hands up her back. "But here's the thing. You may get more than you bargained for."

"Calculated risk," she murmured, and brought her mouth to his.

THEY'D lost sunset and were drifting toward dusk. Somewhere along the way, he realized, his last CD had finished playing. Now

there was only the sound of wind rising up and Drusilla's breathing.

Rain was coming. He could smell it—could sense the storm dancing on the air.

Dru combed her fingers through his hair. He had such soft hair, so straight, so full of lights.

"Storm's blowing in. Your car windows up?"

Why the hell was he asking about her car windows when she'd just had a life-altering experience? "Yes."

She stared at the ceiling. "I should go before it rains."

"Uh-uh." He wrapped her close, then rolled over with her. "You should stay, and we'll listen to the rain when we make love again."

"Again?"

"Mmm. Did you know you have this little dimple right at the base of your spine?" He skimmed his finger there as he opened his eyes, saw her face.

"It's raining," she said softly.

He brought their joined hands to his lips. "We'll listen to it."

IT WAS still raining when she rose. The soft, steady patter after the storm turned the room into a cozy nest, one she wished she could wallow in.

"Stay the night. I'll even run out early and hunt up something decent for breakfast."

"I can't. I don't have any clothes. Any fresh clothes."

He obliged her, but that didn't mean he couldn't stall. "Bring extra clothes tomorrow. We'll have dinner out, then come back here. Or your place," he added, easing his arms around her. "I don't care where. A planned date instead of our usual impromptu."

"This wasn't a date." She wiggled away to button her shirt. "This was sex."

"Excuse me. We had food, alcoholic beverages, conversation, and sex. That, baby, is a date."

She could feel her lips quiver into a smile. "Damn. You got me. It's after midnight. I'll come back here around eight tomorrow night."

"Great. Do you want me to frame the watercolor for you?"

She beamed at him. "I can have it?"

"I'm willing to trade a painting for a painting."

She put on her shoes. "You've done two of me."

"One day when I'm a dead, famous artist whose work is studied, they'll call this my Drusilla period."

"If that's what you want as payment, I'll pose again."

"Sunday."

"Yes, fine. What you want me to wear?"

"I know exactly what I'm looking for." He walked over and kissed her. "You'll be wearing rose petals. Seeing as you're a florist, you should be able to get me a supply."

"I admire your work, but you're not painting me naked."

"Okay, I'll wear clothes, but you're wearing rose petals. Ssh." He tapped a finger on her lips before she could speak again. "Obviously I'm not having you pose nude so I can get you into bed, because I've already gotten you into bed. And for the record, I don't use art that way. I've had this image in my head since the first time I saw you. When it's finished, you'll decide what to do with it."

"Red rose petals." She angled her head. "I'm going to order a lot of them."

SETH walked whistling into the boatyard the next morning. He carried a box of doughnuts, fresh from the bakery.

Cam was already at work drilling turnbuckles into a hull.

"She's a beauty." Seth strolled up to the prettily proportioned yawl. "Sorry I didn't give you a hand the last couple days."

"We managed." There wasn't a sting in the tone, but there was the implication of one.

"Where's everybody?"

"Phil's upstairs. Ethan and Aubrey are checking crab pots this morning. I've got Kevin coming in after school. Another week or so, he'll be sprung, put in more time."

"School's out in a couple weeks? What the hell day is it?"

"You'd keep up better if you checked in at home once in a while."

"I've been busy, Cam."

"Yeah." Cam set another turnbuckle. "You sashay in and out as the mood strikes you. Decide to come swaggering in today because you finally got lucky last night?"

"What's it to you?"

"What's it to me?" Cam set the drill aside, vaulted down to the floor. "It's a hell of a lot to me when you up and disappear for the best part of a week. It's a hell of a lot to me when I have to watch Anna worrying because you can't be bothered to tell us what's going on. You don't treat your family like a goddamn convenience."

They were squared off now, nose to nose. Boxers who didn't give a damn about the bell.

"Hold it, hold it!" Phillip all but leaped between them, pushed them apart. "What's going on here? You two want to pound on each other, take it outside."

"This is between me and Cam."

"This is a place of business," Phillip corrected. "Our business, so that brings me into it. Keep it up, and the first one to take a punch at you may be me. I had enough aggravation from you."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about remembering your responsibilities. I'm talking about having a client who expects a completed design, which you agreed to do. Where is it, Seth?"

He opened his mouth, closed it. Drusilla's sloop. He'd forgotten it. Just, he remembered, as he'd forgotten he'd told Anna he'd pick up the mulch she wanted for a new flower bed. As his anger turned inward, he stalked out of the cargo doors.

"Needs a kick in the ass," Cam grumbled.

"Why don't you get off his back? I've been as worried and annoyed as you have, but he's old enough to come and go as he pleases. How long are you going to let him stand out there feeling like crap?"

Cam hissed out a breath. "Damn it. I'll go deal with it."

Seth heard the footsteps on the dock. "I'm sorry I let you down," he blurted out. "I'll do whatever you need. I'll make it up to you."

"Oh, hell." Cam raked his fingers through his hair. "You didn't let me down. Nobody expects you to give all your time to this place. Or to be at home every spare minute. First Anna's nagging at me because you're home too much. Then she's ragging because you're not home at all. How did I get caught in the middle?"

"Just lucky, I guess. I had some things I had to take care of. And I was working. I got caught up in it. The family's not a convenience for me. You can't believe that. It's a miracle. If it wasn't for you—"

"Stop right there. This isn't about old business, it's about now."

"I wouldn't have a now without you."

"You wouldn't have one without Ray. None of us would. Leave it at that." He jammed his hands into his pockets, looked out over the water. "So you're serious about the sexy florist?"

They looked over the water together. "It appears that way."

"What kind of doughnuts did you pick up?"

They were okay, Seth thought. Somehow, no matter what went on, they came back to being okay. "Variety pack."

"Let's go before Phil finds them."

Seth stopped short. "Zucchini football."

Color drained out of Cam's cheeks. "What did you say?"

"The Bread Bowl. The zucchini bread. She baked bread, and you guys used it as a football. She told me."

Cam gripped Seth's shoulders. "When did you see her?"

"I don't know. Felt like I dreamed it. And you—you tried to intercept a pass and got hit above the eye. That's right, isn't it?"

"Yeah." Cam had to steady himself. "She came running out the back door shouting at us just as I was making the jump. I turned—and *bam.* That bread was like a brick. She never could cook."

"Yeah, she told me."

"We all started laughing—me and Dad, Phil and Ethan. Bunch of lunatics. Mom stood there staring at us. I can still see it. See her."

He let out a long breath. "Then she went back in and got another loaf so we could keep playing. She tell you that part?"

"No." Seth laid a hand on Cam's shoulder as they turned toward the cargo doors. "I guess she wanted you to tell me."

Nine

DRU stepped outside her shop to snip off any faded blossoms in the whiskey barrel tub of verbena and heliotrope beside the front door. The night's storm had cooled the air, swept away the dragging humidity, and left the morning fresh and bell clear.

The night she'd spent with Seth had been glorious. He intrigued her and challenged her. He aroused her and amused her. He stirred up feelings in her no one had—not even the man she'd nearly married. He was, she believed, the most compelling man she'd ever met. Now they were lovers, and she was already looking for the trouble ahead. Because if you didn't look ahead, she reminded herself, you rammed straight into those problems and sank.

She carried the little shears back into the storeroom, where she put it in its place on the shelf. The bells on the front door jingled, signaling her first customer of the day.

"Good morning. How can I help you?"

"Oh, I'm not sure. I'm just going to look around."

"Help yourself. It's a gorgeous day, isn't it?" Dru walked over to prop open the front door. "Are you visiting St. Chris?"

"That's right," Gloria said.

"You picked a perfect time." Dru ignored a fission of unease at the way she was being studied. "Are you here with your family?" The woman didn't look like the type to spend time or money on flowers. She looked hard, edgy, and cheap. When Dru caught what she thought was a whiff of whiskey along with the woman's florid perfume, she wondered if she was about to be robbed. Then she dismissed the thought. Nobody robbed florists, certainly not in St. Chris.

"If you're looking for something to cheer up your hotel room while you're here, I have carnations on special this week."

"That might work. You know, you look familiar, and you don't sound like a local. Do you spend much time in D.C.?"

Dru relaxed again. "I grew up there."

"That's got to be it. The minute I saw you, I thought . . . Wait a minute! You're Katherine's daughter. Prucilla—no, no, Drusilla."

Dru tried to imagine her mother having any sort of acquaintance with the badly dressed woman, then cursed herself for being a snob.

"That's right."

"Well, I'll be damned." Gloria planted her hands on her hips, made her smile large and friendly. She'd done her research. "What the hell are you doing down here?"

"I live here now. So you know my mother?"

"Sure, sure. I worked on several committees with Kathy. Haven't run into her in a while. Last time I think it was a fund-raiser for literacy. Book-and-author dinner at the Shorham."

The event had been written up in the Washington *Post,* with enough detail in the on-line archives to make Gloria's claim smooth. "How is she, and your father?"

No, Dru thought, she wasn't being a snob. She was simply a good judge of character. But she spoke evenly. "They're both very well, thank you. I'm sorry, I didn't get your name."

"It's Glo. Glo Harrow," she said, using her mother's maiden name. "Hell of a small world, huh? Seems to me the last time I talked to Kath, you were engaged. Guess it didn't work out."

"No, it didn't."

"Well, men are like buses. Another one always comes along. You know, my mother's friendly with your grandfather." And that was true enough, though "acquainted" would have been more accurate. "The Senator, he just keeps trucking along."

"He's an amazing man." Dru spoke coolly now.

Just then a man walked in, and Dru turned toward him. "Good morning."

"Hi. Don't mind me. Finish what you're doing. I'm not in a rush."

"Would you like to look around some more, Ms. Harrow?"

"No." She'd spent more than enough time on this visit. "Why don't I take a dozen of those . . . What was on special?"

"Carnations." Dru gestured to the holding vase.

Gloria calculated it was a cheap enough price to pay for the up-close look. She took out cash, laid it on the counter. Now that the contact had been made, Gloria wanted to be gone.

"Give my best to your mom when you talk to her," Gloria added as she started out.

"Oh, I will." Dru turned to her new customer. Some of the temper that had begun to simmer leaked out on her face.

"Bad time?" the man asked.

"No, of course not. How can I help you?"

"First, I'm Will. Will McLean." He offered a hand.

"Oh, you're Aubrey's friend." *Seriously cute,* Aubrey had said. And with perfect accuracy, Dru decided. "It's nice to meet you."

"You, too. I just got off shift, figured on swinging by to see Aub, maybe catch up with Seth before I go home and crash for a few hours. Those flowers Seth got my girl a few weeks back were a really big hit. Can't let him get an edge on me. What've you got that'll make up for me working doubles most of the week?"

"How's your budget?"

"Just got paid." He patted his back pocket.

She paused. "Have a seat," she told him while she went to a refrigerated unit. She took out a single long-stemmed rose in cotton-candy pink. "A dozen of these are guaranteed to knock her out."

"Maybe I should make it two dozen. I've had to cancel two dates in the last ten days."

"Two dozen will put her in a coma."

"Perfect. Can you put them in one of those fancy boxes?"

"Absolutely." She moved to the work counter. "You and your older brother Dan and Seth have been friends a long time."

"Since we were kids," Will concurred. "I can't believe he's been back a month and I haven't been able to catch up with him. Ah, can I ask you something? That woman who was in here before? Was she hassling you?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I don't know, just a feeling. Plus, there was something about her. I think I know her from somewhere. Can't put my finger on it, but it doesn't feel right. Do you know what I mean?"

"I know exactly what you mean." She glanced over at him. He was a friend of Aubrey's, of Seth's.

"She claimed to know my mother, but she didn't." No one, Dru thought, absolutely no one referred to her mother as Kathy. It was Katherine, and on rare occasions Kate. "I don't know what she was after, but I'm glad you came in when you did."

"You want me to stick around awhile?"

"No, but thanks. She doesn't worry me."

"You called her Harrow?" Will shook his head. "Doesn't ring any bells. But I know her from somewhere."

IT WAS a mistake to call her mother. Dru realized it immediately. But she hadn't been able to get the morning customer out of her mind. The only way to check out the story was to ask.

Her mother had breezily told her she knew no one named Glo Harrow, though she did know a Laura and a Barbara Harrow. Dru was lulled by her mother's cheerful mood and the news that she and Dru's father were reconciled. For the moment, at least.

But the conversation had soon shot down its usual paths. Why didn't she come home for the weekend—better, for the summer? Why didn't they all go spend a few days at the family enclave in North Hampton?

Reasons were brushed aside, excuses ignored until, when they hung up, Dru had no doubt her mother was just as irritated and unhappy as she herself was.

It reminded her to leave bad enough alone.

LATE that afternoon the shop bells jingled. Dru looked over. "Seth," she said with pleasure.

"I thought I'd come by. I got reamed by Cam this morning because I haven't been around."

"Did you work it out?"

"Yeah. We're okay. I need to go by and grovel to Anna for a while, but I thought I'd drop by. We still on for tonight?"

"Do you want to be on for tonight?"

"I've been thinking about being with you all day."

It warmed her. "I suppose I might have given you a passing thought, though I've been pretty busy in here today."

"So I hear. Will came by the boatyard and nearly gave Aub a heart attack with that forest of roses."

"You're lucky to have friends that go back to childhood."

"Don't you?"

"Not really. In any case," she went on to avoid the subject, "I had an odd visit just before he came in. Some woman . . ." She continued as she locked up her cash from the day. "She claimed to know my mother, but once she started talking, I knew she didn't. Not only from what she said but how she looked."

"How did she look?"

"Hard, cheap, and not like anyone who's ever worked on a charity committee with my mother. She was pumping me, feeling me out."

There was ice in the pit of his stomach. "What did she say?"

"Nothing much. I think she was laying groundwork for something, but then Will came in. She bought some carnations and left. He said he thought he recognized her from somewhere."

A sickness coated his throat. "She tell you her name?"

"Mmm? Yes." Dru took a last glance around, gathered her purse and keys. "Glo Harrow. I've really got to get moving."

His hand clamped down on her arm. "If she comes in again, I want you to call me."

"Why? She's just some woman hoping to con me out of some money or trying to get an introduction to my grandfather. Believe me, I've handled that sort of thing all my life."

"I want you to promise me. I mean it. If she comes in, you go in the back, pick up the phone, and call me."

She started to say she didn't need protection, but there was an urgency in his voice that had her nodding instead. "All right. I promise."

HE'D BARELY SLEPT. EVEN the pleasure of having Dru curled beside him had been tainted. Though his gut told him Gloria had tromped on yet another part of his life, he knocked on the McLean brothers' apartment door. He had to be sure.

Dressed for work, Dan answered. "Hey, what's up? You just caught me. I've got an early meeting."

"I need to talk to Will."

"Good luck. He's the dead man in the bedroom down the hall."

"This can't wait."

"Hey, Seth, really, the guy's wasted." Since Seth was already walking through the debris of the living room, Dan went after him. Resigned, he jerked a thumb toward a door.

Seth didn't bother to knock but pushed the door open. The room itself was barely closet size and mostly bed.

Will lay on it, faceup, his arms flung out to the sides as if he'd fallen backward in that position and hadn't moved since.

Dan walked over to the window. "He'll probably be speaking in tongues." And ruthlessly whipped the drapes back.

The morning sun flashed over the bed. Will didn't twitch.

Dan moved to the bed. "Here's how it works." He put his mouth close to Will's ear and shouted, "Code blue! Dr. McLean, report to Exam Room Three. Stat!"

"Whazit?" Will sprang into a sitting position. "Where's the crash cart? Where's . . ." Some part of his brain cleared as he blinked into Seth's face.

Seth grabbed his arm. "I have to talk to you."

"You bleeding internally?"

"No."

"You will be if you don't get the hell out of here and let me sleep." He grabbed a pillow to block out the light.

"You were in Dru's shop yesterday." Seth yanked the pillow away. "The woman who was in there when you came in. You said you thought you recognized her."

"Right now I wouldn't recognize my own mother. In fact, who the hell are you, and what are you doing in my bedroom?"

"Tell me what she looked like."

"If I tell you, will you go away?"

"Yeah. Please."

Yawning hugely, Will scrubbed his hands over his face. "Something about her weirded me out. Dressed like she should've been working a corner in Baltimore. Bleached, bony, blond. What my dad would call shopworn. Diagnosis from a quick visual would be serious alcohol abuse, along with some recreational chemicals."

"How old?" Seth demanded.

"Running toward fifty, but hard years. She leaves her body to science, we ain't getting much out of it."

"Yeah." Seth sat heavily on the side of the bed.

"Like I told Dru, there was something familiar about her. Couldn't place it. Maybe it was just the type. What? Did she hassle Dru?" Then his jaw dropped as the picture fell into place. "Oh, hell. Gloria DeLauter."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute." Dan held up both hands. "You're saying Gloria DeLauter was in Dru's flower shop? Yesterday? That can't be. She's been gone for years."

"It was her," Will stated. "It didn't click until just now. She's changed, but not that much."

"No." Seth dropped his hands. "Not that much."

"What the hell's she doing back here?" Will demanded. "You're not a kid now. She can't try to drag you off so she can squeeze your brothers for ransom. She can't be looking for a sloppy mother-son reunion, so what's the point?"

"Will's a little slow," Dan commented, "especially when it comes to the dark side. Money would be the point, right, Seth? Our pal here's a successful artist, climbing up the shiny ladder of fame and fortune. She's back wanting her cut of the profits."

"That covers most of it," Seth grumbled.

"I still don't get it." Will shoved at his hair. "You don't owe her a damn thing. She's got nothing on you."

"I've been paying her for years. Stupid, but I couldn't see what else to do to keep her from hassling my family."

"They don't know?" Will asked.

"No. I never told anybody. She tracked me down in Rome a few months ago. That's when I figured there wasn't any point in me being three thousand miles away. I wanted to come home. She hit me up again about a week ago. I thought I'd bought some time. But if she went into Dru's shop, it wasn't because she wanted to buy daisies."

"What do you want us to do?" Dan asked him.

"Nothing you can do. Meanwhile, I'll see what she does next."

HE TOLD himself she was gone. She'd taken the ten thousand and split. She'd checked out Dru, and that was worrying, but Seth imagined that once Gloria had met her, she'd dismissed the idea of him and Dru having any sort of serious relationship.

The fact was, he was far from sure where he stood with Dru himself. She wasn't the type who wore her heart on her sleeve or anywhere else he could get a good look at it. And wasn't part of his fascination with her the very fact that she was so contained?

One way he used to see into people was by painting them.

He knew she was far from sold on the idea of posing for him again—particularly in the way he had in mind. But he set up his studio on Sunday morning as if she were in agreement.

"Why won't you just take money for the painting?"

"I don't want money." He arranged the sheets on the bed. The material was soft, would drape fluidly. And their color, the palest honeysuckle, would be perfect against the bold red of the rose petals and the delicate white of Dru's skin.

"That's the point of selling your work, isn't it?" She clutched her robe closed at the throat and cast uneasy glances at the bed. "To make money?"

"I don't paint for money. That's a handy by-product, and I leave it to my rep."

He opened the first bag of petals and tossed them on the sheets in seemingly random patterns. "Just relax and leave it to me."

"I can't possibly relax when I'm lying naked on a bed strewn with rose petals and you're staring at me."

"Sure you can." He added more petals, stepped back.

"One hour? And I get the painting?"

"Deal. Let's just take this off." He untied the robe, eased it gently from her shoulders. "I love looking at you. I want to show you how you look to me. Lie down. I want you turned on your side, facing me. Your arm like this." He lifted it, draped it low over her breasts.

She did her best to ignore the sensation along her skin where his fingertips, his knuckles brushed. "I feel exposed."

"Revealed," he corrected. "It's different. Slide this knee up. Keep this arm angled down. Palm up, open. Good."

He reached into the bag, scattered petals over her, letting some drift into her open palm before he placed some more deliberately on her hair, on the slope of her breasts, over her arm, along the line of hip and leg.

He stepped back. "Just try not to move too much." He retreated behind the canvas. "Talk to me."

"About what? How ridiculous I feel?"

"Why don't we go for a sail this evening? We'll bum dinner off of Anna and go out after."

"I can't think about dinner, and I certainly don't want to think about your sister when I'm . . . naked."

"People are going to see a painting of a striking woman."

"My mother," Dru said in sudden horror.

"How is she? She and your father still back together?"

"As far as I know. But they're not happy with me."

"Hard to make everybody happy all the time." He sketched the curve of her shoulder, the stem of her neck, the slender line of torso. Then he began to paint.

The contrast of the red against white skin, the glint of light, the delicacy of the sheets with their deeper shadows in the soft folds. Here was his faerie queen again, but now she was awake.

She stopped thinking about the pose, her modesty. It was an incredible thrill to watch him work. An exhilaration. Did he realize, she wondered, how the intensity came over him? She forgot the time limit they'd set. Whatever fantasy he'd created in his

mind, she'd become too much a part of it to break the spell.

Did the subject always fall in love with the artist? she wondered. Was it just the nature of things for her to feel this outrageous intimacy with him and this stupefying need for him?

When his gaze moved over her, as if absorbing what she was, she shivered. "Can I see what you've done so far?"

"Uh-huh." He set down his brush, picked up a rag, and never took his eyes off the canvas.

Dru slipped out of bed, picked up the robe, and wrapping herself into it, walked over to him. Only a fraction done, she realized, and already brilliant. "It's beautiful."

"It will be," he agreed. "This is a good start." He suddenly leaned down, his lips a whisper from hers. "I'm desperate for you. You know it. All you have to do is smile."

Her lips curved, a kind of knowing. In her eyes an invitation shimmered that was both luminous and languid.

He saw everything he wanted in that one moment—the awareness, the confidence, the desire, and the promise.

She went back to the bed and continued to pose.

Seth was almost unaware of his own hand moving. Of mixing the paint, dabbing it, stroking it, all but breathing it onto the canvas so that her face bloomed for him.

"I can do it," he said as he laid aside his brush and came around the canvas. "When I do, it'll be the most important thing I've ever done. Do you know why?"

She could barely breathe over the tumult of her heart. She could only shake her head.

"Because this is what you are to me. What I knew, somehow, you'd be to me from the first moment. Drusilla." He stepped toward the bed. "I love you."

Her breath shuddered out. "I know." She pressed a hand to her heart in wonder that it didn't simply burst free in one mad leap of joy. "I know. I'm terrified. Oh God, Seth, I'm terrified, because I love you, too."

She sprang up, scattering rose petals, and leaped into his arms.

Ten

HURRICANE Anna swept through the house and had her men ducking for cover. She blew through the living room, snatching socks, shoes, empty glasses. By the time she reached the kitchen, the survivors made themselves scarce. Even the dog went into hiding.

From what he hoped was a safe distance, Seth cleared his throat. "Um, Anna, it's just dinner."

She rounded on him. "Just dinner?" she repeated.

"Whatever we were having is fine. Is great," he amended. "Dru's not fussy or anything."

Anna yanked open cupboards, slammed them shut. "So it's just fine to give an hour's notice that we're having company for dinner."

"It's not company, exactly. I thought we'd just grab something, then—"

"Oh, you thought you'd just grab something." She walked toward him. "Stay!" she ordered when Seth tried to slip out of the room.

"Okay, okay. Look, what's the big deal? Somebody's always dropping by for dinner."

"This is different." Since Anna had just pulled a large chef's knife out of the block, Seth decided not to argue.

"Okay. I'm sorry. I'll help."

"Damn right you will. Red potatoes. Scrub."

"Yes'm."

"Jake! Pick up your mess in the den. Kevin! Run the vacuum."

"Why do you want them to hate me?" Seth pleaded.

Anna's only answer was a steely look. "When you've scrubbed those potatoes, I want them cut into chunks. About this size," she said, holding up her thumb and forefinger.

"It's not all my mess on the den floor, I want you to know." Jake stomped in, shot Seth a sneer.

"Set the table. Use the good dishes. Wash your hands first."

Jake stalked to the sink. "I'm *never* bringing a girl over here."

"I'll think twice about it myself," Seth muttered.

"I beg your pardon?"

He winced. "Nothing. It's just, well, I've brought girls over before. Dru even ate here before, and you didn't go into a fit over it."

"That's different. She dropped by unexpectedly, and you barely knew her. And you may have brought girls here before, but you never invited the woman you're in love with to dinner before. Men don't understand anything, and I don't know why I've been plagued by a herd of them." Anna sniffed.

"Don't cry. Oh, man. Please, don't do that." Desperate, Seth abandoned his potatoes and rushed over to stroke Anna's hair. He stepped back suddenly. "I never said I was in love with Dru."

"What, now I'm blind and stupid?"

Instead, he took her hands. "I barely finished telling her. How come you know this stuff?"

"Because, you stupid idiot, I love you." She threw her arms around him. "I want you to be happy. I want you to be so happy."

"I am." He pressed his face into her hair. "A little spooked along with it."

"It's not real if you're not a little spooked." She held tight another moment, then let go. "Now get out of here. Guest soaps, towels. Toilet seats down."

"I APPRECIATE your letting me impose this way. Again."

Anna chose a blue vase for the cheerful black-eyed Susans Dru had brought her. "We're happy to have you. It's no trouble at all."

Jake rolled his eyes dramatically behind Dru's back.

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"We're under control, thanks." With a deft hand Anna lifted the lid on the skillet, poked the chicken with a fork. "Do you cook?"

"I've gotten very adept at boiling pasta, nuking up jarred sauce, and mixing it together."

"Oh, my heart," Anna said, and laughed. "Raw clay. I love mold-

ing raw clay. One of these days I'll show you how to make a nice, basic red sauce and see where we can go from there. Seth"—Anna beamed at him when he came in—"open the wine, will you? Pour Dru a glass. Show her how my perennials are coming along while I finish putting dinner together."

"I'm glad to help," Dru protested.

"Next time. Just go out with Seth, enjoy your wine. We'll be ready in ten minutes." Anna shooed them out.

LATER Seth followed Dru home, where they sat on her porch steps in the warm summer night, watching fireflies dance in the dark.

"You had a good time?"

"I had a wonderful time."

"Good." He brought her hand to his lips. "Because Anna's going to pass the word, and you'll be expected to repeat the performance at Grace's and at Sybill's."

"Oh." She hadn't thought of that. "I'll need to reciprocate. I'll need to have everyone over for . . ."

She'd have to have it catered, of course. And determine how best to keep the teenagers entertained. "I'm out of my league," she admitted. "The kind of dinner party I'm used to hosting isn't what's called for here."

"You want to have everyone over?" The idea delighted him. "We'll get a grill and cook out. We'll toss on some steaks and corn on the cob. Keep it simple."

We, she thought. They'd slid from individuals into we.

"If it makes you feel any better, Anna was a maniac for the hour before you got there tonight."

"Really?" The idea warmed her. "It does make me feel better. She always seems so completely in charge."

"She is. She scares us boneless."

"You worship her. Every one of you. It's fascinating. This is very new territory for me, Seth."

"For me, too."

"No." She turned her head. "It's not. Family gatherings, whether

casual or traditional, impromptu or planned, are very old territory for you. You don't need a map. You're very lucky to have them."

"I know it." He thought of where he'd come from. He thought of Gloria. "I know it."

"Yes. It shows. You're all so *full* of each other. They made room for me because you asked them to. You care for me, so they'll care for me. It won't be like that with my family. You'll be very carefully questioned, analyzed, and your background checked."

The idea of the background check had his blood chilling.

"If they don't like what they find, do things stop between us?"

"I pulled myself away from there, from them, because I couldn't live that way. I make up my own mind, and heart."

"Then let's not worry about it." He drew her into his arms. "I love you. I don't care what anyone else thinks."

HE WANTED it to be just that simple.

He'd learned that love was the single most powerful force. But love was rarely simple. It was its facets, its complexities that made it such a strong force. So, loving Dru, he faced the fact that he would have to tell her everything. She had a right to know where he'd come from. Eventually.

He told himself he deserved the time to just be with her, to enjoy the freshness of their feelings for each other. He made excuses. He wanted her to get to know and become more comfortable with his family. He needed to finish the painting.

Days passed into weeks, and Gloria made no contact. Maybe this time she'd stay gone.

He bargained with himself. He wouldn't think about any of it until after July Fourth. Every year the Quinns held a huge come-one, come-all picnic, as they had since Ray and Stella's day.

But before the beer and crab, they were due for champagne and caviar. With obvious reluctance and after considerable nagging by both her parents, Dru had agreed to attend one of the Washington galas with Seth as her escort.

"Damn, look at you." Cam stood in the bedroom doorway and

whistled at Seth in his tux. "All slicked up in your monkey suit."

"You only wish you could look this good." Seth shot his cuffs. "I get the feeling I'm going to be the artist on display at this soiree. I nearly bought a beret instead of a tux, but I restrained myself."

He began to fuss with the tie. "This rig was Phil's pick. Classic, according to him, but not dated. I'll be swimming in a lot of blue blood this evening. I don't want to drown in it."

Cam's eyes met his. "Money don't mean jack. You're as good as any of them and better than most. Quinns don't take second place."

"I want to marry her, Cam."

"Yeah, I got that."

"When you marry someone, you take on their family, their baggage, the whole shot."

"That's right."

"I deal with hers; she has to deal with mine. I get through tonight in one piece, she makes it through the insanity around here on the Fourth, then I have to tell her about before. About Gloria, all of it."

"If you're thinking she'll run, then she's not the one for you. And knowing women, and I do, she's not the running type."

"I'm not thinking she'll run. I don't know what she'll do. What I'll do. But I have to lay it out for her and give her the chance to decide. I've put it off too long already."

"It's history. But it's your history, so you have to tell her. Then put it away again." Cam stepped back. "Real slick." He gave Seth's biceps a squeeze, knowing it would ease the trouble on his face. "Oooh, you've been lifting."

"Cram it."

Seth was laughing when he left the house, grinning when he opened his car door. And the panic slammed into his throat like a fist when he saw the note on the front seat.

> Tomorrow night, ten o'clock.
> Miller's Bar, St. Michael's.
> We'll talk.

Yeah, they'd talk. Damn right they'd talk.

HE REMEMBERED TO TELL HER she looked beautiful. She did, in the stoplight-red dress that skimmed down her body and left her back bare but for a crisscross of skinny, glittering straps.

He remembered to smile, to make conversation on the drive to Washington. He ordered himself to relax. He would deal with Gloria as he always dealt with her. He told himself she could take nothing from him but money.

And he knew it was a lie. It wasn't just money Gloria wanted. She wanted to gouge at his heart until every bit of happiness bled out of it. She hated him for being whole.

"I appreciate your going to all this trouble tonight."

He glanced over, brushed a hand over hers. "It's not every day I get to mix with the movers and shakers at some spiffy party."

"I'd rather be at home sitting on the porch swing."

"You don't have a porch swing."

"I keep meaning to buy one."

Something was wrong. She knew his face. "We'll stay two hours. My parents double-teamed me on this one. I wonder if we ever really get beyond the point where a parent can emotionally blackmail us."

Her words made him think of Gloria, and dread curled in his stomach. "It's just a party, sugar."

"Oh, if only. A party's where you go to have fun. My mother wants to show you off, and I'm going to let her."

"Well, you've got to admit, I look terrific tonight."

"Can't argue with that. And you're trying to cheer me up. So thanks. I'll promise to do the same on the way home when you're glazed and incoherent from being interrogated."

"Does it matter to you what they think of me?"

"Of course. I want all those people who gave me that sticky sympathy over my breakup with Jonah to take one look at you. I want them to think, Well, Dru landed on her feet, didn't she?"

Tension settled in his neck, too weighty to be shrugged off.

GROUPS of people mixed and mingled to the muted background music of a twelve-piece orchestra. The decor, a patriotic red, white,

and blue, was echoed in flowers, table linens, balloons, and bunting. A huge ice sculpture of the American flag had been carved.

There was a great deal of white on the female guests as well, which took its form in diamonds and pearls. Dress was conservative, traditional, and very very rich.

He'd do it in acrylics, he thought. All sharp colors and shapes, with bright crystal light.

"Drusilla"—Katherine swept up, resplendent in military blue—"don't you look lovely. But I thought we said you'd wear the white Valentino." She kissed Dru's cheek and, with an indulgent tsk-tsk, brushed her fingers over Dru's hair. "When are you going to grow this back? You have such beautiful hair, and here you go around with it chopped off like a boy."

"And Seth"—she held out a hand to him—"how wonderful to meet you. I was so hoping you and Dru would come stay with us for the weekend so you wouldn't have that terrible drive."

It was the first he'd heard of it, but he rose to the occasion. "I appreciate the invitation, but I couldn't get away. I hope you'll forgive me and save me a dance. That way I'll be able to say I danced with the two most beautiful women in the room."

"Aren't you charming." She pinked up prettily. "And you can be certain I'll do just that. Come now, I must introduce you."

Before she could turn, Drusilla's father strode up. He was a striking man, with silver-streaked black hair and hooded eyes of dense brown. "There's my princess." He caught Dru in a fierce and possessive embrace. "You're so late, you had me worried."

"We're not late."

"For heaven's sake, let the girl breathe," Katherine demanded. "Proctor, this is Drusilla's escort, Seth Quinn."

"Good to meet you. Finally." Proctor took Seth's hand in a firm grip. Those dark eyes focused on Seth's face. Studied.

"It's good to meet you."

"It's a pity you couldn't make time to come for the weekend."

"Dad, it's not Seth's fault. I told you that I couldn't manage it—"

"Dru's shop is terrific, isn't it?" Seth interrupted, his tone cheer-

ful as he took champagne from a tray offered by a waiter, passed flutes to Katherine, to Dru, to Proctor before taking one for himself. "I'm sure the business aspects are complicated and challenging, but I'm speaking aesthetically. The use of space and light, the evolving blend of color and texture. One artist's eye admiring another," he said easily. "You must be incredibly proud of her."

"Of course we are." Proctor's smile was sharp, lethally so. "Drusilla is our most cherished treasure."

"There's Granddad. Seth"—Dru reached down, gripped Seth's hand—"I really should introduce you."

"Sure." He shot a smile at her parents. "Excuse us a minute."

"You're very good at this," Dru told him.

"You might've mentioned the weekend invite."

"Yes, I'm sorry. I should have. I thought I was saving us both, and instead I put you in the hot seat. Hello, Granddad." She kissed the handsome, solidly built man.

He had a rough and cagey look about him, Seth thought. Like a boxer who dominated in the ring as much with wit as with muscle. His eyes were the same brilliant green as his granddaughter's.

"Here's my best girl. Where's that painter your mother's been burning my ears about? This one here?" Keeping one hand on Dru's shoulder, he sized Seth up. "Well, you don't look like an idiot."

"I try not to be."

"Granddad."

"Quiet. You got sense enough to be making time with this pretty thing?"

Seth grinned. "Yes, sir."

"Senator Whitcomb, Seth Quinn. Don't embarrass me, Granddad."

"It's an old man's privilege to embarrass his granddaughters. I like your work well enough," he said to Seth.

"Thank you, Senator. I like yours well enough, too."

Whitcomb's lips pursed for a moment, then curved up. "Seems to have a backbone. My sources tell me you're making a decent living off your painting."

"Quiet," Seth told Dru when she opened her mouth. "I'm lucky to be able to make a living doing something I love. As your record indicates, you're a strong patron of the arts. You obviously understand and appreciate art for art's sake."

"Build boats, too, don't you?"

"Yes, sir. When I can. My brothers are the finest designers and builders of wooden sailing vessels in the East."

"Your grandfather was a teacher. Is that right?"

"Yes," Seth said evenly. "He was."

"The most honorable of professions. I met him once at a political rally at the college. He was an interesting and exceptional man. Adopted three sons, didn't he?"

"Yes, sir."

"But you come from his daughter."

"In a manner of speaking. I wasn't fortunate enough to have my grandfather for the whole of my life, as Dru's been fortunate enough to have you. But his impact on me is every bit as deep. I hope he'd be half as proud of me as I am of him."

Dru laid a hand on Seth's arm, felt the tension. "If you've finished prying for the moment, I'd like to dance. Seth?"

"Sure. Excuse me, Senator."

"I'm sorry." Dru turned into Seth's arms. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't be. I liked him." That, Seth thought, was part of the problem. He'd seen a shrewd and intelligent man who loved his grandchild and expected the best for her. And the best was unlikely to be a stray with a father he'd never met and a mother with a fondness for blackmail.

She eased back when the music stopped, and saw Jonah over Seth's shoulder. "If it's not one thing," she said quietly. "Hello, Jonah. And Angela, isn't it?"

"Dru." Jonah started to lean in, as if to kiss her cheek. He stopped short at the warning that flickered into her eyes, but his transition to a polite handshake was silky smooth. "You look wonderful, as always. Jonah Stuben," he said to Seth, and offered a hand.

"Quinn, Seth Quinn."

"Yes, the artist. I've heard of you. My fiancée, Angela Downey."

"Congratulations."

"And how's your little business, Dru?" Jonah asked her. "And life in the slow lane?"

"Both are very rewarding. I'm enjoying living and working among people who don't slide into pretense every morning along with their wing tips."

"Really?" Jonah's smile went edgy. "I got the impression from your parents that you were moving back shortly."

"You're mistaken. And so are they. Seth, I'd love a little fresh air."

"Fine. Oh, Jonah, I want to thank you for being such a complete ass." Seth smiled at Angela. "I hope you're very happy together."

HE WAS worn out when they got back to Dru's. From the drive, the tension, and the thoughts circling like vultures in his mind.

"I owe you big."

He turned his head, stared at her blankly. "What?"

"I owe you for tolerating everything. You had to run the gauntlet."

"Yeah, well"—he shoved open the car door—"you warned me."

"I'm not who they assume I am. I don't want what they persist in believing I want. I'm never going to please them in the way they expect. This is my life now. Will you stay?"

"Tonight?" Seth walked with her toward the front door.

"To start."

He stepped inside with her. He didn't know what to do with the despair, with the sudden, urgent fear that he was going to lose everything he'd tried so hard to hold on to.

He pulled her close, as if to prove he could hold on to this.

"THAT'S a smart woman you've got there," Stella commented. They walked through the moist, heavy night air near the verge of Dru's river.

"She's got a strong, complicated brain. Everything about her's on the strong and complicated side."

"Strong's sexy. Don't you think she looks to you for the same?

Strength of mind, of character, of heart? All the rest is just glands."

"I fell for her so fast. One minute I'm standing up; the next I'm flat on the ground."

"What're you going to do about it?"

"I don't know." He picked up a stone, skipped it out over the ink-black river. "You take somebody on for the long haul, you take up their baggage, too. My baggage is damn heavy, Grandma. I have a feeling it's about to get a lot heavier."

"You've handcuffed yourself to that baggage, Seth. You've got the key. You always have. Don't you think it's time to use it and pitch that load overboard?"

"She'll never go away and stay away."

"Probably not. What you do about it is what makes the size of the load. Too damn stubborn to share it. Just like your grandfather."

"Really?" The idea simply warmed his heart. "Do you think I take after him in some ways?"

"You got his eyes." She reached up, touched his hair. "And his stubborn streak. Always figured he could handle things himself. And you've made the same damn mistakes he made with Gloria. You're letting her use your love for your family and for Dru as a weapon."

His jaw set. "I'm not dragging Dru through this."

"Hell. That girl doesn't want a martyr." She planted her hands on her hips and scowled at him. "Stubborn to the point of stupid. Just like your grandfather," she muttered. And was gone.

Eleven

THE bar was a dive, the sort of place where drinking was a serious, mostly solitary occupation. The blue curtain of smoke turned it all into a poorly produced black-and-white movie scene. It smelled of last year's cigarettes and last week's beer.

The socializing area consisted of a strip along the side where a

pool table had been jammed. A bunch of guys were playing a round of eight ball while a few more stood around sucking beers.

Seth took a seat at the end of the bar and ordered a Bud.

He supposed it was fitting that she'd dragged him out to a place like this. Gloria was raised in an upper-class environment, but all the benefits and advantages of that upbringing had been wasted on a spirit that continually sought, and found, the lowest level.

When she walked in, a couple of the pool players looked over, checked her out. She wore denim cutoffs that hugged her bony hips. The snug top was hot pink, left several inches of midriff bare. She'd had her belly button pierced. Her nails, fingers, and toes were coated in a glitter polish that looked black in the ugly light.

She slid onto a stool. It only took one look at her eyes for Seth to realize at least a portion of the money he'd given her had gone up her nose.

"G and T," she told the bartender. "Easy on the T." She lit a cigarette, then blew a slow stream of smoke at the ceiling.

"You've got five minutes."

"What's your hurry?" She tapped her glittery nails in a rapid tattoo on the bar. "Drink your beer and relax."

"I don't drink with people I don't like. What do you want?"

"I want this gin and tonic." She picked up the glass the bartender set in front of her. Drank long and deep. She sent the pool players another look, licked her lips in a way that curdled Seth's stomach. "Lately I've been thinking I need a nice little place at the beach. Daytona maybe."

She took another drink. "You now, you don't want a place of your own, do you? Still living in that same house, crowded in with those kids and dogs. You're in a rut."

"Stay away from my family."

"Or what?" She sent him a smile as glittery and black as her nails. "You'll tell your big brothers on me? Only smart thing they did was take you in so they could get the old man's money."

She tossed back the rest of her drink and signaled for another. "That money should've been mine."

She fired up another cigarette. "You got yourself some smarts. Hooked yourself up with a live one, didn't you? Drusilla Whitcomb Banks. Woo-hoo. Fancy stuff. Rich stuff."

Seth laid a hand on her wrist, closed his fingers around it in a grip mean enough to make her jolt. "Understand this: You go near my family or Dru, and you'll find out exactly what I'm capable of."

She leaned her face into his. "You threatening me? *Son?* You want me to steer clear of your nearest and dearest?"

"That's my bottom line."

"Here's mine." She jerked her hand free. "We've been playing nickel and dime long enough. I want my cut. One-time deal, lump-sum payment, and I'm gone. That's what you want, right?"

"How much?"

Satisfied, she took another deep drag. He'd always been the easiest of marks. "One million."

He didn't even blink. "You want a million dollars."

"I've done my homework, sweetie pie. You get big bucks when the suckers plunk it down for your paintings. Add to that your fancy girlfriend. She's rolling in it. Lots of money there. The kind of money that doesn't like scandal. Mess things up for you if it got out in the press that the Senator's purebred granddaughter was hooked up with a mongrel. I can play it all kinds of ways," she added. "You and the Quinns won't come out clean in any of them."

She threw back her head and laughed, the sound so full of malice and glee, the pool players stopped smacking balls to look over. "Press'll lap it up. But I'm giving you a chance to buy it first. You can consider it an investment."

His face was blank, had stayed blank throughout her rant.

She gulped gin. "I'll give you a week to come up with it—cash. But I want a down payment. Ten thousand. You bring it here tomorrow night. Ten o'clock. You don't show, I start making calls."

He simply turned his back on her and walked toward the door.

HE POURED another shot of Jameson and studied its deep amber glow in the single light he'd turned on in his studio.

He'd long since stopped questioning what Gloria DeLauter was. Part of her was inside him, and he accepted that as he would a birthmark. He didn't believe in tainted blood. Each one of his brothers had come from some sort of horror, and they were the best men he knew.

He sat drinking by that single light in a room filled with his paintings and the tools of the work he loved. He'd already made his decision, and he would live with it. But for tonight he'd cloud his future with Irish whiskey.

When his cell phone rang, he ignored it.

DRU hung up and paced her living room. She'd tried Seth's number a half-dozen times, had worn a path on the floor over the last two hours. Since Aubrey had called looking for him.

He wasn't with Aubrey, as he'd told Dru he would be that evening. Nor was he with Dru—as he'd told Aubrey and his family he would be. So where the hell was he?

He'd been off. *Something* had been off, she decided, since the night before. She'd let it go. It wasn't in her nature to pry. If something was wrong, she needed to help. Wasn't that part of the duty of love? It was after midnight. What if he was hurt?

There was one place she imagined he could be.

She'd worked up a good head of steam by the time she turned toward the rear lot of the shop and saw his car parked. What if he couldn't get to the phone? What if he was unable to answer because he was unconscious or ill? She whipped her car into the lot, leaped out, and charged up the stairs.

The image of him lying helpless on the floor had been so strong that when she burst in, saw him sitting on the bed pouring liquor from a bottle into a short glass, it didn't register.

"You're all right." The relief came first, made her knees weak. "Oh, Seth! I was so worried."

"What for?" He studied her out of bleary eyes.

Realization came next. "You're drunk."

"Working on it. What're you doing here?"

"Aubrey called looking for you hours ago. Your stories got crossed. Since you didn't answer your phone, I was foolish enough to worry about you."

"If you came running in here hoping to catch me in bed with another woman, I'm sorry to disappoint you."

"It never occurred to me that you would cheat." Nearly as baffled as she was angry, she walked toward the bed, noted the level of whiskey in the bottle. "Then again, it never crossed my mind that you'd need to lie to me either. Or that you'd sit here alone drinking yourself drunk."

"Told you there's a lot you don't know about me, sugar. This is more my style than a couple polite belts of champagne at some boring political gala. You can't deal with it, it's not my problem."

It stung. "I was obliged to go. You weren't. That choice was yours. You want to drown yourself in a whiskey bottle, that's your choice as well. But I won't be lied to. I won't be made a fool of."

A few more jabs to the pride, he thought, and she'd be gone.

"Can't just let things be, can you?" He shook his head, poured another drink. "Always got to be looking ahead. You're plotting out a future, sugar, and that's just not what I'm about. You're a hell of a lot of fun to be with once you loosen up, but we'd better quit while we're ahead."

"You—you're dumping me?"

"Aw, now, don't put it like that, sweetheart. We just need to throttle back some."

Grief rolled up and numbed her. "All this, all this was just for, what, for sex and art? I don't believe that. I don't."

"Let's not make a big thing out of it." He reached for the bottle again. Anything to keep from looking at her, at the tears swimming in her eyes.

"I love you." She said it calmly. "But that's my problem. I'll leave you alone with yours."

"Dru, don't go," he said when she spun toward the door. "Please don't walk out. I don't think I could stand it." Everything inside him—grief, guilt, loathing, and love—clamped his throat like stran-

gling hands. "I thought I should shove you out before you got pulled under. I can't do it. I can't let you go."

She stared at him, at the naked misery on his face. Her heart, already cracked, split in two. "Seth, please tell me what's wrong. Tell me what's hurting you."

"I shouldn't have said those things to you. It was stupid."

"Tell me why you said them. Tell me why you're sitting here alone, drinking yourself sick."

"I don't know where to start. The beginning, I guess." He pressed his fingers to his lids. "I'm going to need some coffee. Everything I said to you since you walked in the door was a lie."

She took a deep breath. "All right. I'll make you coffee; then you can tell me the truth."

"IT GOES back a long time," he began. "Back before my grandfather. Before Ray Quinn married Stella."

He drank coffee. "Ray met this woman, and they had an affair. They were both young and single, so why not? Anyway, he wasn't the type she was looking for. You know, a teacher. She came from a family like yours. What I mean is—"

"I know. She had certain social aspirations."

"Yeah." He let out a breath. "She broke it off, left. She was pregnant and not too pleased about it, from the way I've heard it. She met another guy, one she clicked with. So she decided to go through with the pregnancy, and she married him."

"She never told your grandfather about the child."

"No, she never told him. Little ways down the road she had a second daughter. She had Sybill."

"Sybill, but . . . oh." Dru let it sift in her mind until it fell into place. "I see. Ray Quinn's daughter, Sybill's half sister. Your mother."

"That cuts through it. She— Gloria. Her name's Gloria. She's not like Sybill. Gloria hated her. I think she must've been born hating everyone."

He was pale and looked so drawn and ill. Dru had to bank down on the urge to simply gather him close and comfort.

"She took off with some guy at some point, got knocked up. That would be me. Turns out he married her. That's not important. I've never met him. When Gloria ran out of money, she went back home, took me with her. I don't remember any of that. They didn't kill the fatted calf for her. Gloria's got an affection for the bottle and various chemical enhancements. I think she came and went for a few years. I know when Sybill had a place of her own in New York, she dumped me there. I don't remember much about it. Didn't remember Sybill at all when I first met her again. I was a couple years old. Sybill gave me this stuffed dog. I called it Yours. You know, when I asked whose it was, she said—"

"Yours," Dru finished.

"I don't remember much except feeling safe when I was with her. She took us in, bought us food, took care of me when Gloria didn't show up for a few days. And Gloria paid her back by stealing everything she could fence when Sybill was out, and taking off with me."

"You didn't have a choice. Children don't."

"I don't know why she didn't leave me and head out on her own. I can only figure it was because Sybill and I had made a connection, because we . . ."

"Because you'd started to love each other." Dru took his hand. "And she resented you both, so she couldn't have that."

He closed his eyes a moment. "It helps that you get it."

"You didn't think I would."

"I don't know what I thought."

"Tell me the rest."

He set the coffee aside. "We lived a lot of different places. She had a lot of men. She'd get drunk or high, so I was on my own a lot. She ran low on money, couldn't get high, she'd take it out on me."

"She hit you."

"However perceptive you are, you don't know that kind of world. She'd beat me if she felt like it. I'd go hungry if she didn't feel like feeding me. And if she paid for drugs with sex, I'd hear

them in the next room. There wasn't much I hadn't seen by the time I was six."

It made her want to weep, but Seth needed strength from her now. "Why didn't social services do something to help you?"

He just looked at her for a moment, as if she'd spoken in a language he didn't recognize. "It never occurred to me to tell anybody." He shrugged. "It was life, that's all. And under it, I was just so scared of her. Then . . . I guess I was about seven the first time. One of the men she brought back with her . . ."

He shook his head, pushed to his feet. Even after all the years between, the memories could slick his skin with sweat.

Her heart simply stopped, then jolted again to pound in her throat. "No. No."

"I always got away. I was fast, and I was mean. I found places to hide. But I knew what it meant. It was a long time before I could stand anyone to touch me."

Without a word she wrapped her arms around him. "Poor baby," she crooned, rocking him. "Poor little boy."

Undone, he pressed his face to her shoulder. "I didn't want you to know about this."

"Did you think I would love you less?"

"I just didn't want you to know."

"I do know, and I'm so awed by who you are. You think this is beyond my scope because of my background. But you're wrong." She held tight. "You're wrong. She never broke you, Seth."

"She might have but for the Quinns. Let me finish it."

They sat on the side of the bed. "During one of her scenes with her mother, Gloria found out about Ray. It gave her someone else to hate, someone else to blame. He was teaching at the university here when she found him. This was after Stella had died, after my brothers were adults. Cam was in Europe, Phil in Baltimore, and Ethan had his own place in St. Chris. She blackmailed Ray."

"For what? He didn't even know she existed."

"Didn't matter to her. She demanded money, he paid. She wanted more, went to the dean and spun some lie about sexual harass-

ment. Tried to pass me off as Ray's kid. It didn't fly, but it started planting seeds here and there. He made a deal with her. He wanted to get me away from her, to take care of me, so she sold me to him."

"Well, that was a mistake," Dru said mildly. "And the first decent thing she ever did for you."

"Yeah." He let out a long breath. "You get it. I didn't know who he was. All I knew was that this big old man treated me decent, and I wanted to stay in that house on the water. When he made promises, he kept them, and he never hurt me. He made me tow the line, but you wanted to when it was Ray's line. Most of all, I was away from her for the first time. I was never going back. He said I'd never have to, and I believed him. But she came back."

"Realized her mistake."

"Realized she'd sold off cheap. She wanted more money or she was taking me. He gave her more, kept giving it. One day he had an accident on the way back from paying her. It was bad. They called Cam back from Europe. I still remember the first time I saw the three of them together, standing around Ray's hospital bed. Ray made them promise to take care of me, to keep me with them. He didn't tell them about Gloria or the connection. He was dying, and he knew it, and he just wanted to make sure I was safe."

"He knew his sons," Dru said aloud.

"When he died, I figured they'd ship me off. I never figured they'd keep me around. They didn't know me, so what did they care? But they kept their promise to Ray. They changed their lives around for him and for me. They made a home—pretty wild one at first, with Cam running it."

For the first time since he'd begun, some of the misery lifted. "I pushed at them, gave them—Cam mostly—as much grief as I could dish out. I kept waiting for them to kick me out. But they stuck with me. They stood up for me, and when Gloria tried to hose them like she'd done with Ray, they fought for me. Even before we found out I was Ray's grandson, they'd made me one of them."

"They love you, Seth. Anyone can see it's as much for your sake as it is for their father's."

"I know it. There's nothing I wouldn't do for them. Including paying off Gloria the way I've been doing on and off since I was fourteen."

"She didn't stay away."

"No. She's back now. That's where I was tonight. She came into your shop."

"The woman." Dru stiffened, rubbed suddenly chilled arms. "Harrow, she said. Glo Harrow."

"It's DeLauter. I think Harrow's a family name. She knows about your family. The money, the connections, the political implications. She's added that to the mix. She'll do her best to hurt you if I don't give her what she's after."

"It's just another form of blackmail. She's using your love as a weapon, and you're handing it to her. You have to tell your family. Now."

"Dru, I haven't figured out if telling them's the right thing to do. Much less telling them at two in the morning."

"You know very well it's the right thing—the only thing—to do. Do you think what time it is matters to them?" She crossed to the workbench where he'd tossed his phone. "I'd say Anna would be the one to call first, and she can contact the others." She held out the phone. "Do you want to call her and tell her we're on our way or shall I?"

"You're awful damn bossy all of a sudden."

"Because you need to be bossed just at the moment. Do you think I'm going to stand by and let her do this to you? Do you think any of us will?"

"The point is, I don't want her taking swipes at you, my family. I need to protect you from that."

"Protect me? You're lucky I don't knock you senseless with this phone. Your solution was to let me go. Do you think I want some self-sacrificing white knight?"

He nearly smiled. "Would that be the same thing as a martyr?"

"Close enough."

He held out his hand. "Don't hit me. Just give me the phone."

Twelve

THE kitchen had always been the place for family meetings. It was there they gathered now, with coffee on the stove and the lights bright enough to push away the dark.

They had all come without hesitation, dragging themselves and their sleeping kids out of bed. They had to be alarmed, but no one peppered Seth with questions. Dru could feel the tension quivering in the sluggish middle-of-the-night air.

The younger ones were shuffled upstairs and back to any available bed, with Emily in charge.

"I'm sorry about this," Seth began.

"You drag us all out of bed at two in the morning, you've got a reason." Phillip closed his hand over Sybill's. "You kill somebody? Because if we've got to dispose of a body this time of night, we'd better get started."

Grateful for the attempt to lighten the mood, Seth shook his head. "Not this time. Might be easier all around if I had."

"Spit it out, Seth," Cam told him.

"I met with Gloria tonight."

There was silence, one long beat. "I'm sorry. I was going to try to find a way not to tell you, but there isn't one."

"Why wouldn't you tell us?" Sybill's hand tightened on Phillip's.

"It's not the first time."

"It's going to be the last." Fury snapped into Cam's voice. "What the hell is this, Seth? She's been back around before, and you didn't mention it?"

"Since I was about fourteen."

Cam shoved back from the table. "She's been coming around you all this time, for years, and you don't say a damn word?"

"No point yelling at him yet." Ethan leaned on the table, and

though his voice was calm, there was something in his eyes that warned Dru his manner of fury would be every bit as lethal as his brother's. "She get money from you?"

Seth started to speak, then just shrugged.

"Now you can yell at him," Ethan muttered.

"You paid her? You've been paying her?" Shock vibrated as Cam stared at Seth. "What's the *matter* with you? We took legal steps to keep her away from you. Why the hell did you let her bleed you?"

"I'd've done anything to keep her from touching any one of you. It was just money."

"But she didn't stay away," Anna said quietly, "did she?"

"No, but—"

"You should've trusted us, known we'd be there for you."

"I gave her money." Seth held out his hands. "Just money. It was all I knew how to do to protect you. I needed to do *something,* anything I could, to pay you back."

"Pay us back? For what?"

"You *saved* me. You made me family. Cam, you made me."

It took a moment before he could speak, but when he did, Cam's voice was rough, and it was final. "I don't want to hear that kind of crap from you. I don't want to hear about checks and balances."

"That's not what he meant." Struggling with tears, Grace spoke softly. "Sit down, Cam. He's right."

"What the hell does that mean?" Cam dropped back in his chair.

"He never lets me say it," Seth managed.

"Hush now," Grace said. "They did save you. They started it when you were nothing more than a promise to their father, because they loved him. Then they did it for you, because they loved you. All of us loved you. If you weren't grateful for what they did, there'd be something wrong with you."

"I wanted to—"

"Wait." Grace only had to lift a finger to stop him. "Love doesn't require payment. Cam's right about that."

"I needed to give something back. But that wasn't all. She said things about Aubrey."

Aubrey, who'd been silently weeping, found her voice. "What?"

"Just things like, Wouldn't it be a shame if anything happened to her. Or her little sister or her cousins. I was terrified. I was fourteen. I was scared to death that if I said anything to anybody, she'd find a way to hurt Aubrey or one of the kids."

"Of course you were," Anna said. "She counted on that."

"And when she said I owed her for all the trouble I'd caused her, how she needed a few hundred for traveling money, I figured it was the best way to get rid of her. I just wanted her gone."

"She knew that." Sybill let out a sigh, rose to go to the coffeepot. "She knew how much your family mattered to you, so that's what she used. She was always good at finding just the right button to push."

"She'd go away, months at a time," Seth continued. "Even years. But she came back. I had money. My share from the boatyard, what you gave me from Ray, then from some paintings. I knew it was stupid to keep paying her. I had the chance to go to Europe to study, to work. I took it. Wasn't any point in her coming around here if I was gone."

"Seth"—Anna waited until he looked at her—"did you go to Europe to get away from her? To get her away from us?"

The look he sent her was so fierce, so full of love, it made Dru's throat hurt. "I wanted to go. I needed to find out what I could do with my work, on my own. But in the back of my mind . . . Well, it weighed in, that's all."

"Okay." Ethan turned his mug in slow circles. "You did what you thought you had to do then. What about now?"

"About four months ago she showed up on my doorstep in Rome. She'd heard about me and figured the pot was a whole lot richer now. She said she'd go to the press, to the galleries, and give them the whole story. Her story," he amended. "I paid her off, and I came home. But it turns out I brought her back with me."

"You never brought her anywhere," Phillip corrected.

"Okay, she came back. Only this time the money didn't send her off again. She came into Dru's shop."

"Did she try to hurt you?" Temper fired into Cam's face again.

"No." Dru shook her head. "She's added me to the mix, using me as another weapon to hurt Seth. To hurt all of you. I don't agree with what Seth did, but I understand why he did it." Her gaze traveled around the table from face to face. "The point is, he loved you all too much to do otherwise—and she knew it. Now it has to stop."

"There's a woman with brains," Cam said. "Did you pay her tonight, kid?"

"No. She set new terms. She'll go to the press, tell her story." He shrugged, then realized that a great deal of the weight on his shoulders had already lifted. "But she's got a new spin, pulling Dru into it. Senator's granddaughter in sex scandal. It's bull, but if she does it, it's going to pull everybody in."

"How much she want this time?" Cam asked.

"A million."

Cam choked on the coffee he'd just sipped.

"She won't get a penny." Face grim, Anna patted Cam on the back. "Not a penny this time or ever again. Is that right, Seth?"

"I knew when I sat with her in that dive that she'll have to do whatever she's going to do."

"We won't be sitting on our hands," Phillip promised. "When are you supposed to meet her again?"

"Tomorrow night, with a ten-thousand-dollar down payment."

"Where?"

"This redneck bar in St. Michael's."

"Phil's thinking." Cam grinned. "I love when that happens."

"Yeah, I'm thinking."

"Why don't I start some breakfast." Grace got to her feet. "And you can tell us all what you're thinking."

DRU listened to the ideas, the arguments, and incredibly, from her point of view, the laughter and casual insults as a plan took shape. Bacon sizzled, eggs were scrambled, and coffee was brewed.

When she started to get up to help set the table, Anna laid a hand on her shoulder. "Just sit, honey. You look exhausted."

"I'm all right. It's just that it seems as if you should talk to the police or a lawyer instead of trying to deal with it all yourselves."

Conversation snapped off.

"Well now," Ethan said in his thoughtful way, "that would be one option. Except you have to figure the cops would just tell Seth how he was a moron to give her money in the first place."

"She *blackmailed* him."

"In a manner of speaking," Ethan agreed. "They're not going to arrest her for it, are they?"

"No, but—"

"We deal with our own." Cam spoke in a tone of flat finality. "Family stands up. That's all there is."

Dru leaned toward him. "And you're thinking I won't stand up."

Cam leaned right back. "Dru, you're as pretty as they come, but you're not sitting here for decoration. You'll stand up. Quinn men don't fall for a woman unless she's got a spine."

She eased back, nodded. "All right. So you handle it your way. The Quinn way," she added. "But I think it might be helpful to find out if, considering her lifestyle and habits, she has any outstanding warrants. A call to my grandfather ought to get us that information before tomorrow night. It wouldn't hurt for her to realize we play hard, too."

"I like her," Cam said to Seth.

"Me, too." But Seth took Dru's hand. "I don't want to drag your family into this."

"Not wanting to drag yours into it or me into it is why we're sitting here at four in the morning." She took the platter of eggs Aubrey passed, scooped some onto her plate. "Your bright idea was to get drunk and dump me. How'd that work out for you?"

He took the platter, tried a smile. "Better than expected."

"I wouldn't advise you going down that path again. Pass the salt."

He reached over, took her face in his hands, and kissed her. Hard and long. "Dru," he said, "I love you."

"Good. I love you, too." She took his wrist, squeezed lightly. "Now pass the salt."

"YOU'RE STAYING HERE. That's the end of it."

"And when did we come to the point where you dictate where I go and what I do?"

"I'm not going to argue about this."

"Oh, yes," Dru said almost sweetly, "you are."

"Please." Seth changed tactics, laid his hand gently on her shoulder. "Stay here and let me do what I have to do."

It was turmoil in his eyes now rather than temper. And she responded to it. "Well, since you ask so nice."

Dru let him go and stood on the front porch with the other Quinn women as the two cars drove away.

Anna lowered the hand she'd lifted in a wave. "There go our strong, brave men off to battle. And we womenfolk stay behind."

"Put on the aprons," Aubrey mumbled. "Make potato salad."

Dru glanced around, saw the same look in her companions' eyes she knew was in her own. "I don't think so."

"So"—Sybill glanced at her watch—"how much lead time do we give them?"

"Fifteen minutes ought to be about right," Anna decided.

Grace nodded. "We'll take my van."

SETH sat at the bar brooding into his untouched beer. The venue, he supposed, was perfect for this showdown with her, with his early childhood, with his own demons. He intended to walk out of it when he was finished and leave all of that misery behind.

"You look a little rough around the edges," Gloria said to Seth when she walked in. "Tough night?"

"You look the same. You know, I've been sitting here thinking. You had a pretty good deal growing up."

She snagged the gin and tonic the bartender put in front of her. "Lot you know about it."

"Big house, plenty of money, good education."

"My mother's a cold fish, stepfather's a wimp. And there's Sybill, the perfect daughter. I couldn't wait to get the hell out."

"I don't know about your parents, but Sybill never hurt you. She

took both of us in when you landed on her doorstep, broke and with nowhere else to go."

"So she could lord it over me."

"Is that why you stole from her when we were in New York?"

"I take what I need. Had to support you, didn't I?"

"You never gave a damn about me. You stole her things because you hated her. You stole so you could buy drugs."

"Whatever I took out of her place I was entitled to. Gotta look out for number one in this life. Never could teach you that."

"Ray didn't even know about you, but you hated him. When he found out, when he tried to help you, you only hated him more."

"He owed me."

"He never knew you existed. But when you told him, he paid you. And it wasn't enough. You tried to ruin him with lies. Then you sold me to him like I was a puppy you were tired of."

"Kept you around for ten years, cramping my style. Old man Quinn owed me for giving him a grandson. And it all worked out pretty well for you, didn't it?"

"I guess I owe you for that one." He lifted his beer in a toast, sipped. "How much you figure you've gotten from me over the years, Gloria? Between what you bled out of Ray, what you've been bleeding out of me? Must be a couple hundred thousand, at least. Of course, you never got anything out of my brothers. You tried, but they didn't bleed so easy."

She smirked. "They'd've paid if I'd wanted them to pay. You wanna keep that fancy art career you've got going from getting screwed up, wanna keep the Senator's granddaughter, you pay."

"So you said. Let me get the terms clear. I pay you one million dollars starting with the ten-thousand-dollar down payment tonight—"

"In cash."

"Right, in cash, or you'll go to the press, to Dru's family, and spin another web of lies about how you were used and abused by the Quinns, starting with Ray. You'll smear them and me and Dru along with it. The poor woman struggling to raise a child on her own, begging for help, only to be forced to give up the child."

"Has a nice ring. Lifetime Movie of the Week."

"No mention in there of the tricks you turned while that child was in the next room—or the men you let touch him. No mention of the drugs, the booze, the beatings."

"Bring out the violins." She leaned in very close. "You were a pain in the ass. You're lucky I kept you around as long as I did."

"You've been tapping me for money since I was fourteen. I've paid you to protect my family, myself. Mostly I've paid you because the peace of mind was worth a hell of a lot more than the money. I've let you blackmail me."

"I'm making you a deal here. One lump-sum payment, and you keep your boring life. Screw with me, and you'll lose it all."

"A million dollars or you'll do whatever you can to hurt my family, ruin my career, and destroy my relationship with Dru."

"In a nutshell. Pay up."

He met her eyes. "Not now, not ever again."

He reached into his pocket, pulled out a minirecorder. "Everything we've said is on here. Might be a problem in court if I go to the cops."

When she grabbed for it, he cuffed her wrist with his hand. "Speaking of cops, they'll be interested to know you jumped bail down in Ft. Worth. Solicitation and possession. You go public, and some tough skip tracer is going to be really happy to scoop you up and haul you back to Texas."

"You son of a bitch."

"Truer words," he said mildly.

"I want my money." She shrieked it.

The quartet playing pool looked over. The biggest of them tapped his cue against his palm as he sized Seth up.

She leaped off the stool, and fury had her practically in tears. "He stole my money."

The four men started forward. Seth rose from the stool, and his brothers walked in, ranged themselves beside him.

"That seems to even things up." Cam tucked his thumbs into his front pockets and gave Gloria a fierce grimace. "Been a while."

"You bastards. I want what's mine."

"We've got nothing of yours," Ethan said. "We never did."

"I take anything from her?" Seth asked the bartender.

"Nope." He wiped the bar. "You want trouble, take it outside."

Phillip scanned the four men. "You want trouble?"

The biggest man tapped his cue twice more. "Bob says he didn't take nothing."

"How about you, Gloria? You want trouble?" Phillip asked her.

Before she could speak, the door opened. The women came in.

Cam muttered under his breath. "Should've figured it."

Dru walked to Seth, slid her hand into his. "Hello again, Gloria. It's funny, my mother doesn't remember you at all. She isn't the least bit interested in you. But my grandfather is." She took a piece of paper out of her pocket. "This is the number to his office on the Hill. He'll be happy to speak to you if you'd like to call him."

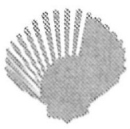
Gloria slapped the paper from Dru's fingers, then retreated quickly when Seth stepped forward.

"I'll make you sorry for this." She shoved through them. "I'll make you all sorry." With one last bitter glance she shoved through the door.

"You were supposed to stay home," Seth told her.

"No, I wasn't." Dru touched his cheek.

Thirteen



THE house and the yard were crowded with people. Crabs were steaming, and a half-dozen picnic tables were loaded with food. The Quinns' Fourth of July celebration was well under way.

Seth pulled a beer from the keg, grabbed some shade, and took a break from the conversations to sketch. His world, he thought. Friends, family. Independence Day. He would remember this one for the rest of his life.

"We've been doing this here since before you were born," Stella said from beside him.

The pencil squirted out of Seth's fingers. No dream this time, he thought in a kind of breathless wonder. He was sitting in the dappled shade, surrounded by people and noise.

And talking to a ghost.

"Nearly made a mess of it, and that ticked me off. But you figured things out in the end."

She was wearing the old khaki hat, a red shirt, and baggy blue shorts. Without any real thought Seth picked up the pencil, turned the page in his book, and began to draw her.

"Part of me was always scared of her, no matter what. But that's gone now."

"Good. Stay that way, because she'll always cause trouble. My lord, look at Junior Crawford. How'd he get so old? Time just goes by, no matter what you do. Some things you let go. Some things are worth repeating. Like this party."

He continued to sketch, but his throat had tightened. "You're not coming back again, are you?"

"No, honey. I'm not coming back again. It's time to look forward, Seth. You don't want to ever forget what's behind you, but you've got to look ahead. Look at my boys." She let out a long sigh as she gazed over at Cam and Ethan and Phillip. "All grown up, with families of their own. I'm glad I told them that I loved them, that I was proud of them, while I was still breathing."

She smiled now, patted Seth's knee. "Glad I got a chance to tell you I love you and I'm proud of you."

"Grandma—"

"Make a good life for yourself, or I'm going to be ticked off at you again. Here comes your girl," she said, and was gone.

Dru sat down beside him. "Want company?" she asked.

"As long as it's you."

"So many people." She leaned back on her elbows.

"Just about everyone swings by. It whittles down by nightfall, and the rest of us stay here and watch the fireworks."

Some things you let go, he remembered. *Some are worth repeating.* "I love you, Drusilla. Just thought that was worth repeating."

She angled her head, studied the odd little smile on his face. "You can repeat it whenever you like. And if you come home with me afterward, we can make our own fireworks."

"That's a date."

She sat up again, examined his drawing. "That's wonderful. Such a strong face—and a friendly one." She glanced around for the model. "Where is she? I don't remember seeing her."

"She's not here anymore." He took a last look at the sketch, then gently closed the book. "Wanna go for a swim?"

"It's hot enough, but I didn't think to bring a suit."

"Really?" Grinning, he stood up, pulled her to her feet. "But you can swim, right?"

"Of course I can swim." As soon as the words were out, she recognized the gleam in his eye. "Don't even think about it."

"Too late." He scooped her up. "Don't forget to hold your breath."

He ran straight down the dock and off the end.

"It's a Quinn thing," Anna said as she handed Dru a dry shirt. "I can't explain it. They're always doing that."

"I lost a shoe. Men are so strange."

"These sandals ought to fit you well enough."

"Thanks. Oh, they're fabulous."

"I love shoes. I lust for shoes."

"With me it's earrings. I have no power against them."

"I like you very much."

Dru stopped admiring the sandals and looked up. "Thank you. I like you very much, too."

"It's a bonus. I would have made room for any woman Seth loved. All of us would. So you're a very nice bonus."

"I . . . I don't have experience with families like yours."

"Who does? It'll be dark soon. Let's go get a glass of wine and get a good spot to watch the show."

When she stepped outside, Seth met her with one very soggy canvas slide and a sheepish grin. "Found it."

She snatched it, set it beside its mate.

"Mrs. Monroe brought homemade peach ice cream." He brought his other hand out from behind his back, a double-scoop cone in it.

"Hmm." She sniffed, but she took the cone.

"Want to sit on the grass with me and watch fireworks?"

She took a long lick. "Maybe."

"Gonna let me kiss you when nobody's looking?"

"Maybe."

"Gonna share that ice cream?"

"Absolutely not."

WHILE Seth was trying to cage his share of the peach ice-cream cone, Gloria DeLauter pulled into the parking lot of Boats by Quinn. She jerked to a halt and sat stewing in the messy juices of her fury, laced with a pint of gin.

She shoved out of the car, stumbling as the gin spun in her head. She lifted the trunk, hooting with delight as she dragged out the two cans of gasoline. "We're gonna have some fireworks, all right."

She stumbled again, stepped right out of one of her shoes, but was too drunk to notice. Limping now, she carted the cans to the door. It took her a while to uncap the first can and splash gasoline on the doors. She splashed it on the brick, on glass, on the pretty barberry bushes Anna had planted along the foundation. When one can was empty, she started on the second.

It was a thrill to heave it, still half full, through the front window.

Then she hobbled back to the trunk and retrieved the two bottles she'd filled with gas earlier and plugged with rags. "Molotov cocktail." She giggled, swayed.

She fumbled out her lighter and flicked. And was smiling when she set the flame to the first rag. It caught faster than she'd expected, burned the tips of her fingers. On a little shriek she heaved it toward the window, shattered it on brick.

She edged closer and, with the heat soaking her face, lit the second rag. Her aim was better this time, and she heard the boom of glass and flame as the bottle crashed inside the building.

She gave herself the pleasure of watching the fire sprint before she ran to her car.

THE rocket exploded across the sky in a fountain of gold against black. With Dru nestled between his legs, his arms around her waist, Seth felt almost stupidly content.

"I really missed this when I was overseas," he told her. "Sitting in the backyard on the Fourth of July . . ." But his voice trailed off. He was on his feet, pulling Dru to hers even as Cam raced toward them.

"Boatyard's on fire."

THE fire department was already fighting the blaze. The doors and windows were gone, and the brick around them blackened. Seth stood, hands fisted. He thought of the work inside that old brick barn. The sweat and the blood that went into it, the sheer determination and family pride.

Then he bent down and picked up the high-heeled backless shoe at his feet. "It's hers. Stay with Anna and the rest," he told Dru, and went to his brothers.

"Couple of kids heard the explosion and saw the car drive away." Cam rubbed his hands over eyes that stung from smoke. "Not much doubt it was arson, since she left the gas cans behind. They got the make and model of her car, and a description. She won't get far."

"She'll see this as payback," Seth said.

"Well, she's got a surprise coming. This time she's going to jail."

"She messed us up real good first."

"We're insured." Cam stared at the blackened brick. The pain in his heart was a physical stab. "We put this place together once, we can do it again. And if you're planning on taking any guilt trips—"

"No." Seth shook his head. "That's done."

"Hell of a mess," Phillip said as he walked up. His face was smeared with soot, his clothes filthy with it. "But it's out. Those kids who called nine one one saved us. Ethan's over talking with the fire marshal. He'll let us know when we're clear to go in."

Phillip folded his arms and studied the building. "We could say screw it, move to Tahiti, and open a tiki bar. Spend our days fishing until we're brown as monkeys."

"Nah. Live on an island, you end up drinking rum. Never had a taste for it."

Phillip slapped a hand on Seth's shoulder. "Then, I guess we stick. Want to break it to Ethan?" He nodded toward his brother as Ethan crossed the muddy lawn.

"He'll be okay. He doesn't like rum either." But the optimism Seth was fighting to hold on to wavered when he saw Ethan's face.

"They picked her up." Ethan swiped a forearm over his sweaty brow. "Sitting in a bar not five miles out of town. You all right with that?" he asked Seth.

"I'm fine with that."

"Okay, then. Maybe you ought to go talk your girl into going on home. It's going to be a long night here."

IT WAS a long night and a long day after. It would be, Seth thought, some long weeks before Boats by Quinn was back in full operation.

He'd tromped through the wreckage and the stink of the building. He grieved over the sketches he'd drawn from childhood on, which were nothing but ashes. He could, and would, reproduce them. But he couldn't replace them, nor the joy each one had given him.

It was nearly dusk the next evening when he drove to Dru's. He was tired down to the bone but as clearheaded as he'd been in his life. He hauled the porch swing he'd bought out of the bed of the truck he'd borrowed from Cam, got his tools.

When she stepped out, he was drilling in the first hook.

"You said you wanted one."

"It's the perfect place." She walked over, touched his shoulder. "Talk to me."

"I will. Sorry I didn't get in touch today."

"I know you've been busy."

"Fire didn't spread to the second level. Main level's a wreck. Between the fire, the smoke, the water, we'll have to gut it. Lost most of the tools. Insurance adjuster was out today. We'll be okay."

"Yes, you'll be okay."

He stepped over to drill for the second hook. "They arrested Gloria. She left her fingerprints all over the gas can she dumped outside the building. And when they picked her up for questioning, she was still wearing one shoe."

"I'm so sorry, Seth."

"Me, too. But I know it's not my fault. All she managed to do was mess up a building. She didn't hurt us. We've built something she can't touch."

He looped the chain, hooked a link. "Not that she'll stop trying." He walked around, looped the other chain. "She'll go to jail."

She wondered if he thought she couldn't see the fatigue on his face.

"But she won't change. She won't change, because she can't see herself. And when she gets out, it's a pretty sure bet she'll come back this way sooner or later, make another play for money. She's in my life, and I can deal with that."

He gave the swing a little nudge, sent it swaying. "It's a lot to ask someone else to take on."

"Yes, it is. I plan on having a long heart-to-heart with my parents, but I don't think it'll change anything. They're overly possessive, discontent people who will most likely continue to use me as a weapon against each other. They're in my life."

"I can deal with that."

She paused, tilted her head. "It's a lot to ask someone else to take on."

"Guess it is. Want to try this out?"

"I do."

They sat, swung gently as dusk thickened and the water lapped the shore. "Does it work for you?" he asked her.

"It certainly does."

"Dru, are you going to marry me?"

Her lips tipped up at the corners. "That's my plan."

"It's a good plan." He took her hand, lifted it to his lips. "Are you going to have children with me?"

Her eyes stung, but she kept them closed and continued to swing gently. "Yes. That's the second stage of the plan. You know how I feel about stages."

He turned her hand over, kissed her palm. "Grow old with me—here—in the house by the water."

She opened her eyes now, let the first tear spill down her cheek. "You knew that would make me cry."

"But just a little. Here." He drew a ring out of his pocket, a simple gold band with a small round ruby. "It's pretty plain, but it was Stella's—my grandmother's." He slipped it on her finger. "The guys thought she'd like me to have it."

"It's the most beautiful thing you could have given me."

He laid his lips on hers, drawing her in as she wrapped her arms around him. "Somebody really smart told me you've got to look ahead. You can't forget what's behind you, but you got to move forward. It starts now. For us it starts now."

"Right now."

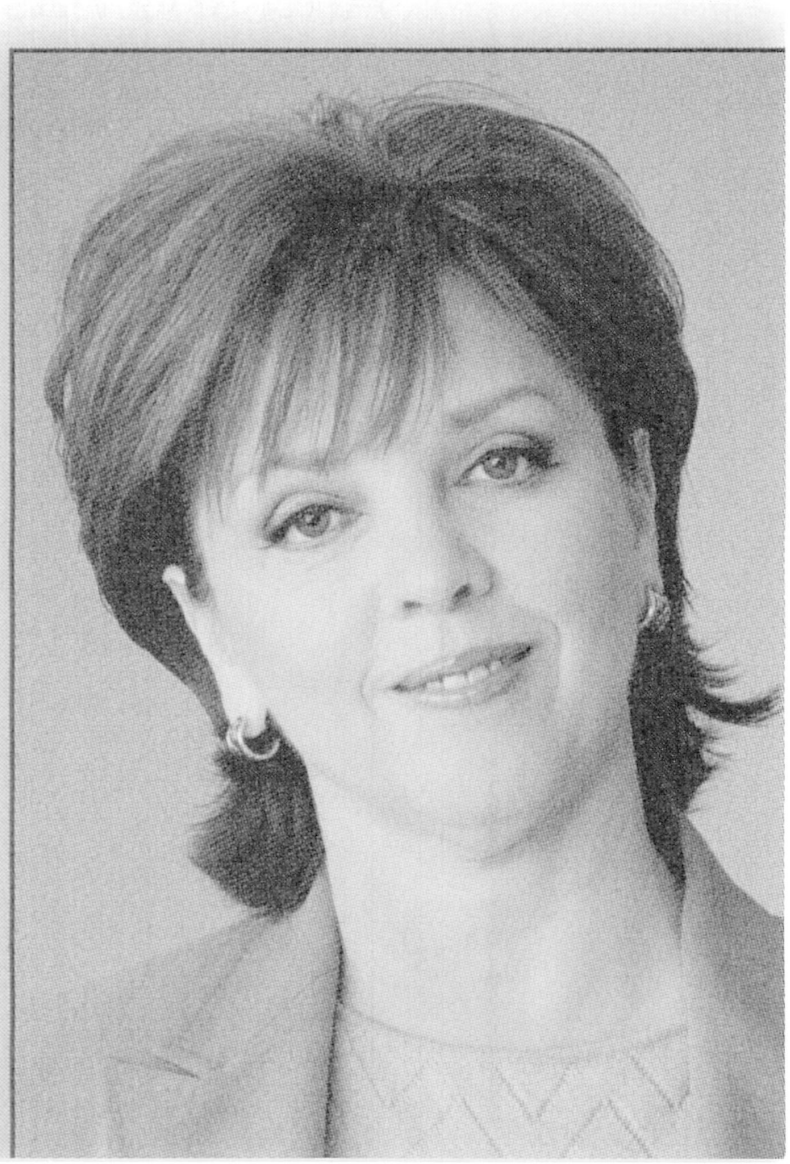
She laid her head on his shoulder, held his hand tight in hers. They rocked on the swing in the heavy night air while the water turned dark with night and the fireflies began to dance.

"I started writing as a way to save my sanity," says Nora Roberts, "and I fell into a job I love." Born Eleanor Marie Robertson (Nora Roberts is a pseudonym), the author of *Chesapeake Blue* is a lifelong Marylander. The youngest of five—and the only girl—she knows firsthand what it's like to be part of a boisterous brood like the fictional Quinn clan. But nothing could have prepared her for what it's like to be snowbound with two small boys for a week, which is what happened in February 1979. After multiple rounds of Candy Land, the harried young mother began jotting down a story just to keep her wits. Almost immediately Roberts realized, "This is the thing I was meant to do."

Readers agreed. Over the years she has written more than 145 books and has had more bestsellers than almost any other author. She also writes mysteries under the name J. D. Robb—a pen name based on the initials of her sons, Jason and Dan.

Roberts currently lives and writes in a small town about an hour from where she grew up in Silver Spring. She and her husband, Bruce, also own a bookstore-cafe called, appropriately, Turn the Page.

"This is the thing I was meant to do."



A cunning psychopath

plans to kidnap a five-year-old boy.

But the boy's mother is a trained assassin.

And she has a plan of her own.

THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *FINAL TARGET*

IRIS JOHANSEN

NO ONE TO TRUST

I

Belim Prison, Belim, Colombia

A COCKROACH was crawling up her arm.

Elena Kyler shuddered as she brushed it off. God, how she hated cockroaches. This cell was teeming with them, but at least they weren't as bad as the rats.

Close it out. Life was not this cell. Go away from here. Think of something beautiful. Father Dominic had always told her that was the only way to endure the unbearable. But this situation was not truly unbearable. The unbearable would be to give in. So she wouldn't think of anything beautiful. She didn't want to bring anything she valued into this filthy cell.

She drew the blanket closer around her. So cold. It was warm during the day, but as soon as the sun set, it became chilly. The cell was damper than the huts they'd kept her in on the way here, and the blanket she'd been issued was thin and worn. She hadn't slept all night.

Stop feeling sorry for yourself.

There might be more opportunity here. These guards seemed more complacent, and they didn't know her. Just get ready. The time would come.

She threw aside the blanket and started doing the warm-up that

preceded her routine. She'd exercised four hours every day since they'd captured her. She'd eaten every scrap of the meager rations and spent the rest of her waking time planning her escape.

She'd be ready.

San Francisco

"Is HE here?" Ben Forbes demanded as soon as he entered John Logan's office. "Did you get hold of Galen?"

"He's here. Or rather, he'll be here in a few minutes." Logan leaned back in the leather executive chair. "But he told me to warn you that he has no intention of taking the job. He said he's had enough of all that bull happening in Colombia."

"Haven't we all?" Forbes said wearily. "But it goes on, and someone has to do something about it."

"Tell that to Galen. He lost two men on the last extraction job he did down there. He doesn't like losing men. And he doesn't like working with the DEA either. He wouldn't come to this meeting if you guys didn't go way back."

"Not as long as the two of you," countered Forbes. "Can't you use your influence?"

Logan shook his head. "Galen goes his own way, and you don't stay his friend by trying to change his mind."

No one knew better than Forbes that Sean Galen walked to the beat of a different drummer. He had been everything from a mercenary to a smuggler, with other shadowy careers in between. But he was unquestionably the best at what he did. "I *need* him, Logan."

"He got paid over a million dollars for the extraction of that executive he did for Folger's coffee. Can you match that?"

"Nah," Galen said, appearing at the doorway. "Not unless he's suddenly gone on the take. And that's not likely." He strolled into the room. "How are you doing, Ben?"

"I've been better." Forbes shook Galen's hand. "But things could look up for me if you'd cooperate."

"I just came off a tough job. I'm on vacation." Galen sat in the visitors chair. "Logan and I are going deep-sea fishing."

"You'll be bored," Forbes said. "I have something more interesting for you."

"I could use a little boredom right now." Galen grinned. "And my mum always said I didn't play well with others. Particularly the feds. They always want to run the show."

"Shall I leave?" Logan asked.

"Why should we run you out of your own office?" Galen asked. "This won't take long."

Logan leaned back farther. "Okay. Pretend I'm not here."

That would be difficult to do, Forbes thought. John Logan was a powerhouse and not the least bit self-effacing. But then, that's what it took in the business world. It was strange, looking at Galen and Logan together. They were as different as stone and quicksilver, and yet the closeness between them was almost visible. Forbes had heard the rumors about Logan's involvement in some of Galen's extremely dubious enterprises before Logan became a successful tycoon. Those experiences had clearly forged a bond. "Feel free to jump in, John. I know you contribute heavily to that drug rehab center in Los Angeles."

Logan shook his head. "You're on your own."

Forbes turned to Galen. "You wouldn't have to worry about dealing with the U.S. government. No DEA intervention."

Galen's brows rose. "You're DEA."

"I'm working on my own on this one."

"Uncle Sam won't like that."

"Tough. It's part of the deal. It's the first chance I've had to get Chavez in ten years."

"Chavez?" Forbes could hear a new tone in Galen's voice.

"Rico Chavez. The Chavez cartel. I believe you've had some experience with him."

"Two years ago."

"That's when you lost your two men, isn't it?" Forbes said. "You were trying to free William Katz, that coffee exec, from the rebels holding him for ransom, but Chavez turned his men loose to help them. You weren't expecting that."

"Usually it's the rebels protecting the drug lords down there. So you're going after Chavez?"

"I've been after Chavez for years. I almost got him a few times. This go-round I may have a chance, if you'll help."

Galen's gaze narrowed. "You want me to kill him?"

"No. I want him here in the States, where we can prosecute him. I want to know who's doing his distributing in this country."

Galen shook his head. "Chavez won't come to the U.S. He'll stay where he's safe. You're out of luck."

"Maybe not. I got a call two months ago from a woman named Elena Kyler. She said she was with a band of rebels in southern Colombia and wanted me to help her get out and give her protection once she's in the U.S. She said she was in possession of evidence that would draw Chavez out of Colombia. She asked me to meet her near Tomaco, and we'd discuss it."

"Trap. Chavez wants to take your scalp, Ben."

"I'm not stupid. I checked with my rebel informants, and there is an Elena Kyler. Her father was Frank Kyler, an American mercenary who went to Bogotá and married Maria Lopez, a Colombian left-wing freedom fighter. They had two children: Elena and Luis. Maria was murdered by government soldiers four years after Elena was born. Evidently Elena and her brother were raised by their father, who was killed seven years ago. Both Elena and Luis were members of a rebel group in the hills surrounding Chavez's coca fields."

"You're reaching for straws."

"I'll find out when I see her. It's worth a shot."

"It's not worth being shot."

Forbes smiled. "I've got a hunch. . . . I believe her."

"Good. Then go get her yourself."

"It may not be that easy. One of my informants told me that she was on the run from Chavez." He hesitated. "The word is that she's been captured and is being held in a prison in Belim."

"A prison?"

"It's a government jail, but Chavez bribes the warden to house his special prisoners."

"Then she'll be of no use to you. If she really has any evidence, Chavez will have her tortured until she gives it up."

"Chavez is at an important meeting with the Delgado family in Mexico City. She may have a reprieve for a while. I've heard he likes to do his own dirty work."

Galen sighed. "Don't tell me. Not just a pickup. You want me to bust her out and deliver her to you? Forget it. Stage a DEA raid."

"And have the government yell bloody murder that we were overstepping our position as guests in their country?" He hesitated, then added, "Besides, there may be informants in the agency."

"Hell, yes, there are informants," Galen said. "When there's that much money floating around, corruption is a fact of life. You're the only DEA man I'd trust without question." He smiled. "You're a throwback, an untouchable. The Eliot Ness of the drug world."

"I don't feel untouchable." Forbes grimaced. "I feel dirty. I've been at this game too long. I want to see something good happen for once. Do this for me, Galen."

"A prison?" Galen shook his head. "Too big a risk. I won't lose another man to that son of a bitch. I'm going fishing."

"Think about it. It would be a challenge and a chance to thumb your nose at Chavez." Forbes turned to leave. "I'll call you in a few hours. I don't know how long Chavez's meeting will last."

When the door shut behind Forbes, Logan asked Galen, "What do you think?"

"I think someone's setting him up. I think Chavez is tired of having an honest man after him and is going to stage an ambush."

"Forbes isn't dumb."

"But he's desperate. He wants this too much. Drug enforcement is the most thankless job on the planet. After twenty-five years Forbes needs to know he's made a difference." Galen crossed to the window and gazed out at the Bay.

"You admire him." Logan smiled. "You've always had a thing about Don Quixote."

"That doesn't mean I'm going to help him tilt at his windmills."

"What's the situation in Colombia now?"

"No better than it's been for forty years. The leftist rebels fight the government; the paramilitary fight the rebels and protect villages *and* sometimes the drug traffickers. The drug lords pay off everyone and probably control the entire shooting match."

"And Chavez is head of the drug faction?"

"One of them. After the breakup of the Cali drug cartel, there was no longer a kingpin. The drug trade decentralized into several groups. Keeping a low profile and using the Internet is the name of the game these days. Everything's under the table. And almost everyone is on the take."

"It does sound a little suspect that this Elena Kyler would choose Forbes to ask for help."

"That's the only part that makes sense to me. Forbes has turned down promotion after promotion because he doesn't want a desk job that would prevent him from personally tracking down drug suppliers. The DEA respects him and lets him run his own show, and his honesty is legendary among the guerrillas and paramilitary groups." He smiled crookedly. "Believe me, they know who's corruptible and who's not. He'd be the obvious choice for Elena Kyler—if she was for real."

Logan stood up and walked to the window. "Water looks a little choppy. Maybe it's not a good week to go fishing."

"It looks fine to me. Do you know how many extractions I've done in Colombia? The blasted place has more kidnappings than anywhere else in the world. This is not my business, Logan. Forbes can't even pay me."

"You've got enough money." Logan laughed. "The point is, you want to go."

"The hell I do." Galen scowled. "It's all a bunch of lies. It's too convenient that Chavez is in Mexico. That so-called evidence is probably bogus. The woman was more than likely bribed."

"So Elena Kyler is not in that prison cell in Belim?"

Galen stared directly into Logan's eyes. "She's probably shooting up in some luxury flat he paid for. There's no way Elena Kyler's in that prison cell in Belim."

* * *

Belim

IT'S only my body, Elena told herself. And I am not my body. I am mind and heart and soul.

"Good." The guard pressed her hard into the concrete cell floor. "Good little whore. You like it, don't you?"

"Yes."

I am not my body. I can accept this defilement.

It wasn't as bad as the time she was raped, because she chose this.

"I like it." I am not my body.

She reached up, closing her arms around his neck. "Juan!" He was panting. Her arms tightened. "What a man you are. Come here."

"You're holding me too tight." There was smug satisfaction in his voice. "Give me a little—"

She gave a twist and broke his neck.

She pushed him off and jumped to her feet, then pulled him into the shadows and draped a blanket around him. No use putting on clothes. As soon as the other guard came, she'd have to lie down with Juan and find a way to lure the man into the cell. He should be here soon. They'd flipped a coin to see who would go first with her.

She huddled against the wall and tried to stop trembling. She felt hurt and bruised and violated. So dirty. She forced back the tears.

I am not my body. I am not my body.

"MEET me at the airport in twenty minutes," Galen said curtly when Forbes picked up the phone.

"You'll do it?" Forbes said.

"Private hangar. We're taking Logan's private jet and pilot. We'll land at an airport outside Medellín, and there will be a Jeep waiting for us to drive to Tomaco. You don't report in to your superiors. You don't talk to anyone unless I okay it. I run the show. The minute you call in the feds is the minute I step out of the picture. Understand?"

"We'll talk about it later."

Galen tried to hold on to his temper. "Listen, Forbes. I have an idea I may get nailed because I'm idiot enough to go along with

you. I know you like to run the show and you may do a good job. But this one's mine, or I don't get on that plane."

Forbes was silent a moment. "I made her a promise, Galen."

"My way."

"Okay." Forbes sighed. "Your show." He hung up.

Galen put his cell phone in his pocket and headed for the door. It was no small victory. Forbes was stubborn. Galen had a hunch that he also had a streak of old-fashioned gallantry. That could be why Chavez had chosen a woman to bait the trap.

If it was a trap. Galen would have to treat it like a trap. It was the only way to keep Forbes alive.

And his own skin intact.

"REPEAT that very slowly, Gomez." Rico Chavez's hand tightened on the phone. "She escaped?"

"Last night. She killed two guards at the prison and escaped in one of their uniforms."

"Fool! You relied on prison guards instead of our own men?"

"Juarez, the warden, didn't like the idea of our men having the run of the prison. He said it wouldn't look good."

"He's paid well enough so that we shouldn't have to worry. Why didn't you take her to the compound?"

"We were close to Belim, and I thought a few days in that cell first might soften her up."

"Find her."

"We're already tracking her. A woman of her description was seen heading south for the hills of Belim. She won't get away. After all, she's only a woman."

"I wonder if that's what those two guards thought before she killed them," Chavez said silkily.

Gomez realized he'd blundered. "I won't take anything for granted. I'll report as soon as we've located her."

Idiot. Chavez's knuckles were white as he hung up the phone. The man had no conception of what Elena Kyler could do. He was the only match for Elena. If he hadn't decided it was essential to

meet with the Delgados, this disaster would never have happened.

No matter. Two more days, and the negotiations should be completed. He went to the mirror and straightened the lapels of his tuxedo. He found the Delgados' fondness for formal dress tiresome. It would be another night of drinking and gambling, and he would be expected to sleep with the blonde they'd provided him. It was always a blonde, usually tall and curvy—and soft.

It was that softness he found most distasteful. A man was a hunter, a conqueror, and a woman should be strong and have enough power of her own to provide amusement.

Like Elena Kyler. He could hardly wait to leave here and get on the hunt.

"YOU'VE been on that phone since we've been airborne," Forbes said. "Am I allowed to ask whom you've been calling?"

"Jose Manero, for one. He's one of the premier information gurus in the world. He has the best contacts in the business and has moles in practically every drug operation in Colombia."

Forbes frowned. "I've never heard of him."

"He likes it that way. You're DEA. And I'm trusting you to keep his name to yourself. I've also been getting a team together." Galen crossed out the last name on his list. "It will take twenty-four hours for them all to arrive in Colombia. That may still be okay. I called a contact in Mexico City, and Chavez is still there." Galen looked down at his notes. "Belim Prison shouldn't be difficult. It's scarcely larger than a city jail, and the guards are as crooked as their warden. I'd rather put a bribe in place than use explosives if—"

"I don't think you're going to have to worry about Belim."

Galen looked at him. "I thought that's what this was about."

"I've just called my own contact in Belim."

"I told you not to phone anyone unless you talked to me."

"It wasn't official, and you were busy. There was a big stir at the prison two nights ago. Two guards killed. Elena Kyler escaped."

"I see."

"Your enthusiasm is overwhelming," Forbes said. "This will

make it much easier for us. It's just a simple pickup now. We just go to Tomaco and wait for her to come to us."

"Come to you, you mean. I'm out of it. I warned you, Forbes."

Forbes stiffened. "I didn't do anything that would warrant . . . All right, I didn't follow your instructions. I won't do it again. No exceptions. Okay?"

Galen didn't answer.

"Please."

Galen gazed at him for a minute and then shrugged. "You may not need me now anyway."

Forbes suddenly grinned. "You're disappointed. You dug out all that information, made all those plans. Too bad, Galen."

"I'll adjust." Galen threw his pen down. "And it may not be as simple as you think. She may be recaptured before she gets to Tomaco. It's over seventy miles from Belim. Or maybe this is just another twist in Chavez's plans to zero in on you. Or it could be she'll be so scared, you'll never hear from her again."

"She won't run away." Forbes shifted his gaze to the darkness outside the plane window. "You didn't talk to her. I've never heard anyone more determined. She's on her way, Galen. I can *feel* it."

THE mud was in her mouth.

Elena spit it out and kept crawling. The rain last night had been bad and good. The wet earth left tracks, but it spoiled the scent for the dogs. If she wasn't stupid, she'd be able to avoid the trackers. She'd avoided them for two days.

She'd take her time and listen and move as her father had taught her. Keep to the ground. They couldn't see you if you were on the ground. The river was only a few miles over this hill, and that would drown out her scent even more.

She stopped to listen. She had to wait a moment before she could hear anything but the sound of her own labored breathing. A dog yapping, far away. Good.

But Gomez might have sent men ahead to guard the river crossing. Everyone knew that this was the only place shallow enough to

cross the river for another forty miles. She had to go around them. No. She wasn't thinking straight. She had to attack. Her father had always told her that when hunted, the only thing to do was turn hunter and eliminate the threat.

She closed her eyes. More death. More blood on her hands.

Stop whining. If it had to be done, then do it. Chavez would think nothing of killing her after he got what he wanted.

Her eyes flicked open, and she pulled out the gun she'd taken from the guard. She started to crawl forward again.

Tomaco

THE house was a crumbling three-bedroom hacienda some five miles outside the town of Tomaco. After a preliminary search Galen permitted Forbes to go inside.

"Not the greatest pad I've ever stayed at," Galen said as he ran his finger over a dust-covered table. "I'm disappointed, Forbes. You should have at least provided maid service for a man of my consequences. This is where she said she'd meet you?"

Forbes nodded. "She didn't want any chance of our arrival leaking to anyone in the village. She said no one has lived here for the past six years. Which bedroom do you want?"

"None of them. Neither do you." Galen turned and headed for the door. "I told my guys to stash bedrolls in the Jeep. We camp in the forest and hide our vehicle in the brush. My mum always told me fresh air was good for me." He went outside and climbed into the Jeep. "Hop in, and we'll hide this fine vehicle in the brush. As compensation for depriving you of a roof, I'll fix the finest alfresco meal you've ever eaten. I'm an extraordinary cook."

Forbes got into the passenger seat. "I suppose your mum told you that too."

"How did you guess?"

IT WAS after midnight when Forbes jerked wide awake.

Something was wrong. A sound?

Galen's bedroll was empty.

Forbes tossed his blankets aside and jumped to his feet. The house. He ran through the woods. A branch slapped him in the face. He could see the driveway of the house just ahead.

Two men struggling. Galen was on top, a gun lying on the ground beside him. Galen grunted, his head whipping back as the man's fist lashed out and caught him on the chin.

The man lunged up and over, bringing Galen with him. Then he was breaking free, scrambling for the gun. Forbes stepped forward and kicked it away.

Galen took advantage of his opponent's distraction and chopped down on the side of his neck. The man went limp.

Galen breathed a sigh of relief as he rose to his feet. "Fast." He picked up the gun. "And tough. She almost broke my jaw."

"She?" Forbes stiffened. "It's a woman? You're sure?"

"Believe me, even in extreme circumstances I can tell the difference. Elena Kyler, presumably."

Forbes took a step closer. The woman was wearing black jeans, a dirty white shirt, and a leather jacket, and was little more than a shadowy figure in the moonlight. She appeared to be of medium height, with short dark hair.

"I felt something warm. She's bleeding." Galen was kneeling, flipping open the jacket. The white shirt was stained with blood.

"For God's sake, Galen. Did you have to do that?"

"I didn't. It's a knife wound. It's been stitched, but it broke open. If we don't do anything, she could bleed to death." He glanced up at Forbes. "It's your call."

"What?"

"There's an excellent chance Chavez sent her to take you out."

"You're crazy. It was probably Chavez who did this to her."

"Showing up here with a stab wound would make any story she told you much more believable. Hell, you want to believe her already. So you tell me, do we stop the blood?"

"Of course we stop it."

"I thought that's what you'd say. I hope you won't regret it." He unbuttoned the shirt and applied pressure to the wound. "Go back

to the camp. I have a first-aid kit in my duffel, and bring those two lanterns. I'll try to stop the bleeding. I don't think any major organs were hit. The blood flow seems to be lessening."

"Right." Forbes hurried back toward the woods.

"YOU'RE not out anymore. Open your eyes," Galen said. "Talk to me." No response. "Talk to me, or I'll open that wound another two inches before Forbes comes back, and then we won't be able to save you. What a shame."

Her eyes opened. Huge dark eyes, staring up at him warily.

"Good. That's progress," Galen said. "Elena Kyler?"

"Yes."

"Where's Rico Chavez?"

"I don't know."

He lifted the compress. "Oh, my, it must have slipped. Look at all that blood."

"I tell you, I don't know." She glared at him. "I was at a prison in Belim. He may still be in Mexico City."

"You have the prison story right." Galen put the compress back. "Think about it. I'll give you a couple minutes."

"Was that Ben Forbes who just left?"

"You could have seen who he was if you'd not played possum."

"No one was to be here but him. It could have been a trap."

"My thought exactly."

"Who are you? DEA?"

"Not in my worst nightmares."

"I didn't think so. I've seen your kind before. I've fought side by side with mercenaries from all over the world. My father was one. You all have the same edge."

"Don't generalize. I'm unique. I'm also supposed to be your savior. Sean Galen, Superman incarnate. Faster than a—"

"Here's your first-aid kit. If you can call it that." Forbes dumped the large kit down beside Galen. "Good Lord, it's as complete as an EMT unit. What were you— Oh, she's awake."

Galen nodded. "Wide-awake, Forbes. It is Elena Kyler."

Elena looked at Forbes. "You were supposed to come alone."

"I needed a little help. It may be a difficult situation. I kept my promise. He's not a fed. Did you bring the evidence?"

"No. We'll have to go together and get it. It's nearby."

"Why don't you go and bring it to us?" Galen asked.

She ignored him. "I don't know how much time we have. Chavez will know I crossed the river ten miles from here."

"And how does Chavez know that?" Galen asked.

"I had to kill two of his men to get across the river." She turned to Forbes. "I stole some supplies from a pharmacy and some clothes in a village near the river. I don't have time for this inquisition. Just bandage me up, and we'll get on the way."

"Unfortunately, if we do that, you might bleed to death," Galen said. "I can stitch her up properly, Forbes. You can have a nice chat while I do it. It may distract her. It could hurt a bit."

She bit her lower lip. "Do it." She glanced at Forbes and then slowly held out her hand. "Will you stay with me until it's over? I don't want him to get too much pleasure out of this."

Forbes smiled, and his hand closed on hers. "I'll stay."

"Thank you." Her gaze shifted to Galen. "Get it over with."

2

ELENA withstood the pain without a word but slumped into a faint as Galen finished the stitching. "Tough," he murmured as he started bandaging the wound. "Very tough."

"Is she going to be okay?" Forbes asked.

Galen shrugged. "Providing she doesn't get an infection. I think she did sew herself up. The stitches were pretty messy. We'd better get her to camp before she wakes up." He lifted her and started for the woods. "Be sure and bring my kit. Like the Boy Scouts, I'm always prepared."

"You're from Liverpool, aren't you? Did they have Boy Scouts there?"

"Of a sort. But my mum never liked me to mix with those rough-and-ready types." He looked down at Elena. "Like this one. She'd be turning over in her grave if she knew I was associating with such a piranha." When they reached the camp, he carefully laid Elena down on his blankets. "You know, she looks slight, but she's very strong. See her shoulders?"

"I think you're still brooding about that right hook."

"It's possible. How old do you think she is?"

"Mid-twenties, maybe."

At the moment she looks younger, Galen thought. In sleep she had a childlike vulnerability. When Elena was awake, her expression had been so full of intensity that he had been conscious only of the character behind the face. Now he could see that the woman's olive skin was perfect, her cheekbones high, and her mouth wide and well shaped. The lashes lying on her cheeks were very long and as dark as her hair. "Some of those moves could have killed me if I hadn't blocked them. She's been trained very well." He glanced at Forbes. "She could put you down in seconds."

"I can hold my own. I'm no amateur."

"You're a policeman. But violence isn't a way of life for you. You told me she's been a guerrilla since childhood. She's a pro."

Forbes shrugged. "So are you. It's a question of choice. Give her a chance, Galen. She may be legitimate."

"She took one look at you and set out to appeal to every protective instinct in your body. I need to know more. We can't afford to accept her at face value. We may be—"

"We have to leave here." They both looked down at Elena to see that her eyes were open. "How long was I out?"

"Ten, fifteen minutes."

"Not too bad." She struggled to a sitting position. "Let's go."

"Where?"

"It's not far. I'll show you."

"Where?" Galen repeated.

She glared at him. "You'll know when we get there. Do you think I'd trust you?" She whirled on Forbes. "We made a deal. I'll give you what you want. Keep your part of it."

"Galen knows what he's doing."

"He could have been bought. Chavez buys everyone."

"He'll get you out of here, Elena."

Her hands clenched at her sides. "How?" she demanded, turning to Galen. "No village from here to Bogotá is going to be safe. Those who Chavez can't buy will be afraid of him. You can't trust the government, the paramilitaries, or the rebels."

"Not even your own group?"

"Particularly not my group," she said bitterly. "They've been funded by Chavez for years."

"Then it seems like a good idea to avoid them," agreed Galen. "I have a team on standby. When I call them, they'll helicopter in and pick us up. There's a jet waiting at an airport near Medellín."

"He's done it before, Elena," Forbes said. "He got Katz away from the splinter rebel group."

"Katz . . ." She frowned. "I heard about that. You blundered. Chavez caught you off guard."

"He won't this time."

"He'd better not." She started to get to her feet and then fell back down. She turned to Forbes. "Will you help me up?"

Forbes bent down and helped her to her feet.

"You've lost some blood," he said. "We can wait awhile."

"No, we can't. I've not come this far to be stopped now." She took a deep breath. "Let's go."

"If you tell me where we're going, I'll be able to get us there if you pass out," Galen said.

"I won't pass out." She moved haltingly toward the Jeep.

"Whatever. Put her in the passenger seat, Forbes."

BLOOD.

Chavez squatted and touched the spattering of dark red on the floor of the pharmacy. Elena's blood.

She was hurt and trying to heal herself. Like an animal on the run, she was seeking a place to hide. No. If that had been the case, she would have hidden in the hills near Belim. She had pressed forward. She had a goal. And he knew what that goal was.

He stood up and turned to Gomez. "Spread out. Cover every town and village. Someone must have seen her. She's hurt, and she's moving too fast to be cautious. She may be trying to reach Dominic. If you can't locate her, find him." Chavez looked at the blood on his fingertips. "I want her found within twenty-four hours."

THE headlights skewering the black road ahead were wavering, darkening, and blurring. Don't faint, Elena told herself. Hold on. Only a little longer. After all these years, only a few miles more.

The huge palm tree . . . "Turn left here."

"I thought you'd left us," Galen said as he made the turn. "You're sure you don't want—"

"Be quiet." She couldn't cope with him right now. From the moment she had opened her eyes and looked at Galen, she knew he was a man to be reckoned with. God, she only hoped he wasn't on the take. When she'd realized she had to leave, she waited months before choosing Forbes. She had asked questions. She knew he was honest. Galen would be more difficult to handle. "The next right."

"This place is hidden well enough," Forbes said. "But the road curves like a snake around the side of this mountain. Will we be able to get a helicopter in, Galen?"

"I'll take care of it."

Her heart leaped in her breast as the headlights gleamed on glass windows. "Here. Stop here." Galen stopped the Jeep a hundred yards from a small adobe house. "Wait here." She started to get out of the Jeep. "I'll be right—"

"I don't think so." The muzzle of Galen's .45 was suddenly pressed to her temple. "Let's wait and see if anything unpleasant happens."

"Nothing's going to happen." Her voice was shaking. "And you're going to have to shoot me to keep me from going into that house. I've waited too long—"

"Elena?" A man was standing in the doorway of the house, shading his eyes from the headlights. "I expected you days ago."

"I had a few problems." She gave Galen a cold glance as she got out of the car and walked toward the man. "They're not over."

"You're here. We'll take care of the rest." He enfolded her in his arms and hugged her before looking at the Jeep. "They're safe?"

She nodded. "DEA. They're going to get us out of here." She turned to Forbes. "You can get out. This is Father Dominic."

"A priest?" Galen got out of the driver's seat.

"Yes."

"No," Dominic said at the same time.

"Among other things," Elena said. "He's also a teacher. He takes good care of the people in these hills."

"How do you do," Dominic said to Galen and Forbes. "My name is Dominic Sanders."

"Is everything all right?" Elena asked him.

He smiled. "Fine." He turned and headed for the kitchen. "Introductions later. You look like you could use some coffee."

She nodded. "Call your helicopter, Galen. Have him here at first light."

"I believe we have some business to transact first with Forbes."

"Oh, yes. His pound of flesh. Don't worry. It's here."

"Show me."

She looked at Galen for a moment and then deliberately turned to Forbes. "I'll show you. Come with me."

Galen followed them into the house. "You won't mind if I just trail along?"

"I do mind." She threw open a door at the end of a short hall. "But you don't care, do you?" She lit the oil lamp beside the door. "Don't raise your voice, or I'll cut your heart out." She moved toward the bed across the room. "It's okay, Barry. Don't be scared."

"Mama?" The little boy threw himself into her arms. "Dominic didn't tell me you were coming."

Her arms tightened around him. God, he felt so good. Warm and safe and wonderful. "He didn't know. How are you?"

"Fine. I'm learning to play Dominic's keyboard—" He pushed away from her and wrinkled his nose. "You don't smell good."

"I know." She gently brushed the dark curls back from his forehead. "That's why I tell you that you should take your bath every night. I haven't gotten a chance to do that lately."

"I didn't mean—" His brow furrowed. "I didn't make you sad, did I?"

"No. You never make me sad." She kissed him on the forehead. "Go back to sleep, love."

"You'll be here in the morning?"

"Yes, and there may be a surprise for you. An adventure. A wonderful, splendid adventure, like none you've ever dreamed of."

"Who are they?" Barry was looking at Forbes and Galen.

"Friends." She tucked him in and stood up. "You'll meet them tomorrow. Good night."

"G'night." His eyes were already closing. "G'night, Mama."

"YOUR child?" Forbes asked as she shut the bedroom door and led them back outside the house. "How old is he?"

"Five."

"He's quite beautiful."

"Yes, he is." Her smile was radiant. "Inside and out."

"You probably damaged your stitches hugging him like that," Galen said. "I suppose you want to take him with us?"

"There's no question that he goes with us." She paused. "He's the prize. He's the magnet that you wanted, Forbes."

Forbes frowned. "I don't understand."

"Barry is Rico Chavez's son. Any DNA test would prove it."

"Wait a minute. You stole Chavez's son?"

"I stole nothing. He's *my* son. Chavez didn't even know he was alive until two months ago." Her lips tightened. "But that won't stop him from trying to take him away from me." She met Forbes's gaze. "Or from coming after him."

"He has a wife and children of his own," Galen said.

"He does. Three little girls. His mistress in Bogotá also has a little

girl. He was tested by a specialist after she was born and told that he might not be able to father sons. He was furious. He sees himself as a conqueror, and a conqueror has sons." She paused. "Then he found out he did have a son."

"How?"

"It doesn't matter. All that should concern you is that I've got something that he can't get anywhere else. Take us to the United States, give us protection, and Chavez will come."

"Maybe," Galen said.

Forbes frowned thoughtfully. "There may be something in what she says—if it's the truth. It makes sense that Chavez would want a son and heir, and he has an extraordinarily macho reputation."

"He'll come," Elena repeated.

"And what do you want out of this?"

"Protection. United States citizenship and enough money to keep us comfortable until I learn a trade to support us."

"You could always join the marines," Galen suggested. "Or teach at a karate school."

She ignored him. "I'm not asking much. If you handle it right, you could capture him."

"I'll have to think about it," Forbes said.

"Think fast. Chavez isn't going to give you much time."

"Elena"—Dominic was standing in the doorway—"come in and eat a sandwich and get a cup of coffee."

"Coming." She turned, then started back. "Before I eat," she said to Galen, "I have to wash up and change. Don't you upset Dominic. He's very sensitive to vibes, and he's getting concerned about me."

"Misguided soul," Galen murmured as he followed her back into the house. "And a little confused about his calling. Is he a priest or isn't he?"

"He says he's not. He doesn't want me to call him Father, but that's how I first knew him." She gave Galen a cold glance. "He's the kindest, gentlest man on this earth, and you will not hurt him in any way. Do you understand?"

Galen smiled. "Perfectly. I'll try to restrain my innate brutality."

DOMINIC WAS A MAN IN HIS late forties with graying hair and the brightest, most alert blue eyes Galen had ever seen. He was dressed in fatigues and army boots, and his conversation was as wide-ranging as it was witty. He was obviously well educated and a teacher. However, he was like no priest Galen had ever met.

"You're confused." Dominic smiled. "You've been studying me like a bug under a microscope, and you don't like not being able to identify the species."

"I'm curious. It's the bane of my existence. But I've been told I'm not to offend you on threat of God knows what."

He sighed. "Elena. She's a little overprotective."

"Are you really a priest?" Galen asked.

"I may still be considered a priest by the church. As far as I know, I've not been defrocked. But years ago I decided I couldn't follow all the teachings blindly. I'm too willful. So in my heart I'm no longer a priest, and it's heart and soul that count."

"But you were a priest when Elena and you first met?"

"Yes. I was working with the rebels in the hills. I came from Miami, all full of zeal and vigor. There was a lot to take on down here. Poverty, drugs, war. Over the years I lost a good deal of the zeal." He smiled. "But there were always the children like Elena."

"You knew her as a child?"

"I knew all the rebels. She was ten when I came to Colombia. Her brother, Luis, was thirteen, and her father, Frank Kyler, was still alive. Frank and I became friends. We didn't often agree, but I liked him. It was difficult not to like him."

"And now you're needed to take care of Elena's son?"

"Elena took care of him herself for the first three years. She hunted, and we grew our own vegetables, and we just managed to survive. Then she decided this was no life for the boy, so she went to Medellín to earn a living and left him with me. It wasn't easy for her, considering how she grew up. She had no one to help her. She did everything from waiting on tables to telephone sales to support us and gather a nest egg to get us out of the country. She came home as often as she could." He poured more coffee into their cups. "It

was no chore for me to take care of Barry. He's a very special child. My only complaint is that he's a bit too solemn. He rarely gets to play with other children. Elena was afraid it wouldn't be safe."

"You're hundreds of miles from Chavez's territory here."

"It didn't stop Elena from worrying. The boy is her whole life. She wouldn't take the chance."

"Why didn't she leave the country before this?"

"She couldn't risk earning money at the only profession she had been trained to do. She had no money, no papers, and she would have had no way to protect Barry from his father if he'd discovered where he was. She was saving every peso to get them away from here, when Chavez found out about the boy. She had to move fast."

"If she'd broken with her guerrilla group, how did she manage to research Forbes?"

"I had maintained contacts with the group and made inquiries."

Galen looked down into his cup. "You think he's Chavez's son?"

"I know he is. I'm aware of all the circumstances surrounding the boy's birth." He smiled. "You don't believe her."

"I believe he's her son. Anyone could see how much she loves the kid. But she could be trying for a free ride and a nice cushion in the U.S. for the boy." His gaze shifted to Dominic's face. "Or it could still be a trap. Though the scenario is getting fairly complicated. If you're bogus, then you're very good."

Dominic laughed. "You're reaching, Galen. Wouldn't it be a bit hokey to bring a priest into the mix? Besides, anyone can see I'd be terrible at subterfuge. I promise you won't catch me burning a candle on the windowsill to tell Chavez you're here."

Galen smiled. "A candle in the window? You are out of the loop. Maybe you really are legitimate."

Dominic's eyes twinkled. "Or maybe I just said that to make you think I am. More coffee?"

"No." Galen stood up. "I'd better check on Forbes."

Moments later Galen found Forbes standing outside the door, looking up at the tops of the trees. "We may have a problem," said Forbes. "There's a strong wind coming up."

"We'll work our way through it." Galen looked at the trees. The wind was picking up. "There's usually a way. I've got to get on the radio and tell my guys to start their approach." He paused. "If you're sure you want to go through with this."

Forbes nodded. "I believe her. Every informant who's reported to me has mentioned that Chavez is after her. This chance is better than anything I've had so far. I've got to take it."

Galen shrugged. "Okay, then we'll get them out."

ELENA quietly closed the door of Barry's room and stood looking at him. There was nothing more beautiful than the sight of Barry sleeping. She would take a moment to look at him and gain strength.

No. She had to move. She went to the bureau, took out a photo album, and stuffed the pictures in her backpack. She couldn't leave the photos. Barry at two, with chocolate birthday cake all over his face. Barry at three, laughing in the little plastic pool. Barry this year, with the bow-and-arrow set she'd bought him.

She moved over to the toy box. The toy bow was on top. It was too big, she realized in disappointment. He would want to take his teddy bear, his favorite books, and the musical globe Dominic had given him. There just wasn't room for everything.

"Mama?"

She turned to see Barry lying on his side, watching her. "I didn't mean to wake you again. Go back to sleep, baby."

"What are you doing?"

"Looking at your toys. Do you play with this bow every day?"

"Most days. I'm Robin Hood, and Dominic is Friar Tuck."

"We're going on a little trip. Would you mind not taking it?"

"A trip? Is that the adventure?"

She nodded. "But it's in an airplane, and we can't take much with us. I thought maybe your bear and the globe."

He was silent a moment. "I guess I don't really need the bow, Mama. I can still pretend. Like you showed me, remember? You said if you didn't have everything you wanted, you could pretend and sometimes pretending was better."

She felt a melting inside her. Don't cry. He mustn't think anything is wrong. "Is Dominic teaching you a song on the piano?"

" 'Yankee Doodle.' Shall I play it for you now?"

"It's the middle of the night."

"I'm not sleepy. You're not sleepy either. I can tell."

"Well, we'd both better try to rest. Otherwise we'll be too tired to enjoy the adventure."

"Will you come and lie beside me?"

"For a little while." She knelt by the bed and laid her head on the pillow. "If you promise to go to sleep."

"I will." He touched her hair. "You smell better now."

She chuckled. "I suppose I should be glad you were willing to take the risk."

"I don't care." He closed his eyes. "As long as you're here. I missed you, Mama."

"I missed you too."

"And I'm glad we're going on an adventure together. Though you have adventures all the time, don't you? When you go away from us, you have adventures. Dominic says you—"

"Not like this one. This one is special. Shh, don't talk."

He sighed. "Okay."

His breathing deepened to sleep fifteen minutes later, but she didn't move. Being here next to him was too sweet.

"TOMACO," Gomez said to his boss, now back from Mexico. "I'm sending four men there now."

"She's been sighted?" Chavez asked.

"No, but I've run across a few people who said they've heard of a man, a teacher, who lives there." He paused. "It seems Dominic Sanders is teaching and caring for the people in the hills."

"And the child?"

Gomez shook his head. "No word."

But where Dominic Sanders was, he'd find the boy. Elena had looked on Dominic as almost a second father.

"Should I let you know when I hear something?" Gomez asked.

Chavez could feel the blood dancing in his veins. Every instinct was telling him that he was coming close. A man should obey his instincts. "No. I'm going to Tomaco myself."

GALEN could hear the faint sound of rotors in the distance.

"They're coming." He shaded his eyes against the rising sun. "Go watch the road, Forbes. Everyone for miles around will hear those rotors. You'd better go get the kid, Dominic."

"I have him." Elena, holding the child's hand, came up behind them, her gaze on the horizon. "You're sure it's them?"

"It's Carmichael." Galen turned to Dominic. "Get your gear. If they manage to land in this wind, we need to be off the ground and out in a few minutes."

"I'm not going."

"What?" Galen said.

Elena turned to Dominic. "You *have* to go. I told you it wasn't safe for you to stay here."

"And I told you that I've found a purpose here that I haven't anywhere else." He touched the little boy's head. "He won't need me anymore. There are people here who do."

"That's not the reason you're staying. You're going to try to cover our tracks. You're blaming yourself."

"Who else is there to blame?"

"It wasn't your fault. I won't leave you here."

"Yes, you will." Dominic smiled. "You have to go with Barry."

"Chavez will find this place. Someone will tell him that you were taking care of Barry. You know what that means." She whirled on the little boy. "Barry, will you go and get me the little plastic case I left in the bathroom?"

Barry looked troubled. "Dominic is going, isn't he, Mama?"

"Of course he's going." She gently pushed him toward the house. "Get me the case." As soon as he was in the house, she turned back to Dominic. "He needs you. *I* need you. It's too—"

"Too much argument." Galen stepped behind Dominic and gave him a quick chop to the back of the neck. Dominic grunted, his

eyes glazing over. Galen caught him and eased him to the ground.

Elena jumped forward. "Why the hell did you do that?"

"I didn't hurt him." Galen met her gaze. "I bet you'd have given him a minute or so more before you chopped him yourself. Now you can claim innocence."

She was silent for an instant and then nodded her head.

"Carmichael's closer." Galen had turned away and was looking at the sky. "You'd better go get the kid while I give Dominic a shot to keep him under until we get to Medellín. Cook up some explanation for Barry why Dominic is going to be sleeping for a while."

"A HELICOPTER," Chavez murmured. "Flying low. Interesting." And possibly detrimental to the hunt. He had thought Elena was alone. If she had enlisted the kind of help who could supply a helicopter, the balance of power might have seriously shifted.

Gomez ran out of a village hut and over toward Chavez's Land Rover. "I have the directions. Dominic's house is on the mountain road. Twenty minutes from here."

"Then let's get on the move." Chavez lifted the binoculars to his eyes. "Have one of the men get the number on that helicopter." The craft was having difficulty, battered by strong winds.

Bad luck, Elena.

3

"HE CAN'T make it." Galen watched as Carmichael made a third pass and then turned away from the house. Galen lifted Dominic and put him in the back of the Jeep. "Pile in and give me directions to the nearest clearing."

"We should have tried that first." Elena lifted Barry into the passenger seat.

"Hindsight is always better, isn't it? I didn't want to parade you

all over the countryside if I didn't have to." Galen shouted for Forbes. But Forbes was already running toward him.

"Two cars are coming up the mountain. One late-model sedan, one Land Rover."

Galen cursed and turned to Elena. "What are the odds?"

"In this area? The people are as poor as dirt. Most of them don't even have cars. It's got to be Chavez."

"Is there a way of going up and around the mountain?"

"No. The road runs out before it reaches the top. Five miles from here."

"Dammit. It's still the only way to go. Get in. Forbes, you sit in back with Dominic." Galen reached for the radio. "I've got to talk to Carmichael."

CHAVEZ lifted the lid of the toy box and took out the bow. She had given his son these cheap toys. She had hidden him in this house and let him know only what she chose to tell him.

His son.

He flipped open the nearly empty album and saw a picture of Elena smiling down at a small boy. Damn her. He tore the picture in two and stuffed the half with the boy in his pocket.

"There's no sign of anyone around the house or in the forest," Gomez said. "But the helicopter is still hovering nearby."

"They're still here. We just have to find them." Chavez returned his gaze to the bow in his hands. He broke the flimsy toy and threw it aside.

"Torch the place. Burn it to the ground."

"AT LEAST there are no trees up here." Galen stopped the Jeep at the end of the mountain road, jumped out, and ran around the back. "Help me get this gear out, Forbes."

"It's still too windy for him to land," Forbes said. "He'll crash against the mountain if he tries."

Galen took the gear out of the Jeep. "We don't have any choice."

"What are you going to do?" Elena was beside them.

"Put this on." Galen threw two canvas harnesses at her. "And put one on Dominic. Carmichael is going to drop a line and pull us away and into the copter. The harnesses fasten onto the O-ring on the line. Then it's up to them to use the winch to pull us up."

"He's going to pull us off this mountain into the air?"

"Do you have a better idea?" Galen tossed a harness to Forbes. "I wasn't expecting this many people, so I told Carmichael to drop another harness with the line. It's good strong equipment. It's the same issue used by the Special Forces for difficult extractions."

Elena had finished putting the harness on the priest and was putting on her own. "Have you used them before?"

"Hell, yes. I never take a chance on everything going right." He checked the fastenings of all the harnesses before he waved at Carmichael. "We have to stagger the ascent. You and Dominic go first. Forbes and I will clip on the second rung. I'll take the kid."

"No. I'll take him."

"This wind is blowing up a gale. You're strong, but I'm stronger, and you're wounded. He's safer with me."

She didn't want to admit he was right. But he was stronger. And with this wound she couldn't chance Barry being torn from her arms. "If anything happens to him, you won't survive either."

"Comforting." Galen went to where Barry was still sitting in the Jeep. "Pretty exciting, huh?" He smiled at the boy. "Are you afraid?"

"No." He looked at Elena. "But Mama is worried."

"That's because she doesn't understand. She thought we were just going to take a plane ride. But it's going to be even better. We're going to fly."

Barry's eyes widened. "Like Peter Pan?"

"You know about him? Of course you do. We can't exactly flit like Peter. We have to have a rope to swing on. The helicopter is going to pull us up. Your mama is going first."

Barry's gaze went to the edge of the mountain. "It's a long way down. Are you sure we won't fall?"

"We won't fall. Like your mother said, it will be an adventure."

Barry stared at him gravely. "Mama will be safe?"

"Your mama will be safe."

A sudden luminous smile lit the child's face. "When can we go?"

Galen laughed and lifted him from the Jeep. "Right now." He pointed to the helicopter, whose side door was opening. "You stand here while I get your mother fastened up."

Galen grabbed the harness Carmichael dropped, put it on, and then spaced a twenty-foot length from Elena and Dominic's position before clipping his and Forbes's harnesses.

"Cars." Forbes's gaze was on the road. "Only minutes away."

"It might be enough time." Galen waved at Carmichael and tied Barry securely to his body. "All set, lad?"

Barry's arms slid around Galen's neck. "I just hold on?"

Galen lifted his thumb to signal Carmichael. "You just hold on. See, there goes your mama."

Elena tried to keep an eye on Barry below her, but the wind was too strong. It was twirling her like a top as the helicopter lifted her and spun away from the mountain.

THE figures looked like puppets dancing on the end of a cord. Gomez lifted his gun. "I'll try for the gas tank."

"No!" Chavez struck his hand. "If the helicopter goes down, so does my son." He could feel the rage tear through him. "See if you can get a good shot at the woman. Blow her head off."

Gomez aimed, then lowered the gun. "Too far away."

They were almost gone from view. The bitch had stolen his son not once but twice. She had won.

No. Chavez wouldn't accept that. He turned away from the cliff. "Find out who helped her. They're going to pay for what they've done."

BARRY was laughing as they pulled him into the helicopter. "I flew, Mama." He hurled himself at Elena after Galen untied him. "Wasn't it fun? Can we go again?"

"Maybe someday. But not quite like this." She gave him a hug. "I'm glad you enjoyed it."

"I did." He turned to Galen. "Thank you very much."

Galen nodded. "You're very welcome. Would you like to go meet the pilot?"

"Please," Barry said eagerly. "Carmichael?"

"Yes. That's his name." Galen looked at Elena. "May I?"

She nodded curtly. Dominic was stirring, and she didn't want Barry present when he found out what had happened.

Forbes was staring out the window, down at the ground below. "Come here for a moment, Elena."

She went to the window. "What's wrong?"

Black smoke. Flames spiking up against the sky.

"Dominic's house?" asked Forbes.

"Yes," she whispered. All those memories of Barry's childhood—gone, destroyed in one cruel act.

"I'm sorry."

"So am I. I have to break it to Dominic. He spent six years in that house." She sat down beside Dominic, leaned back against the fuselage, and waited for him to wake.

"YOU shouldn't have let Galen do it," Dominic said.

"It was done before I realized what was happening." Elena was silent for a moment. "But I would have done it myself."

Dominic shook his head. "You can't take people's choices away from them, Elena."

"I can if it means keeping them alive. I don't have that many people in the world that I care about. Chavez burned your house. He would have tracked you down and butchered you." She took his hand, her voice vibrating with feeling. "I know you're thinking about not getting on that plane in Medellín. Please come with us. What would happen to Barry if I don't get through this?"

"You have Forbes and Galen."

"They're strangers. He's only a pawn to them." Her grasp tightened. "Come with us for a few weeks, a month. You've given me six years. Give me a little more time—just until Chavez is caught."

He sighed. "A few months. Then I have to get back."

She let her breath out. "Thank you, Dominic."

"Since when do there have to be thanks between us? Now, where is Barry? I've got to show him I'm alive and stirring."

She nodded at the front of the helicopter. "Galen has him."

He flinched as he rubbed the back of his neck. "Galen seems to be taking charge in a number of ways."

"Only until we get to the U.S. Then we're done with him. Forbes will take care of things. We made a deal, and he'll keep it." She glanced out the window. "I think we're descending. We must be near Medellín."

DOMINIC and Barry hunched over a game of checkers toward the front of the jet. Elena sat by herself, across the aisle from Galen and Forbes, staring straight ahead. She stiffened warily when Galen crossed and stood beside her. "Yes?" she said.

"Time to go to bed." Galen checked his wristwatch. "It will be at least seven hours before we reach the coast. There's a sleeping compartment and bathroom behind those curtains. Go and hit the sack until we get there."

"I'm fine here."

"Bull. You're just afraid you'll fall apart if you relax. Go on and lie down. I'll get some painkillers and bring them to you."

"I won't have Barry worried."

"He'll be more worried if you collapse. He's going to an entirely new environment. He'll need you to help him adjust."

"I'll be able."

"Right." He helped her to her feet. "If you get some rest. You don't look so good." He gave her a push toward the curtains. "It's a matter of professional pride. You were my assignment, and I have to make sure you're still alive and kicking when I bow out."

ELENA moved her cheek, trying to find a cooler place on the pillow. There wasn't any coolness. So hot . . .

"Here I come. Ready or not." Galen pulled back the curtains and entered the enclosure.

Elena sat up quickly on the bed. "What do you want?"

"Nothing to be alarmed about. I was to bring you something to ease the pain, remember? You don't have to be defensive."

How else did he expect her to be? she thought. She knew he was dangerous and could be totally ruthless, though he didn't look dangerous. He was lean and fit, and some women would have called him handsome. It wasn't until you studied him that you saw the threat.

He drew the curtains shut behind him. "Your cheeks are flushed. You probably have a fever. Unbutton your shirt."

She didn't move.

He came forward. "I need to change your bandage and make sure you haven't broken any stitches." He pulled two containers of pills out of his pocket. "Then, if you're a good girl, I'll give you a couple of penicillin pills to fight the infection."

She stiffened. "I don't have to be a good girl. Neither Forbes nor Dominic would let you withhold medicine from me."

"It was just a turn of phrase." His gaze narrowed on her face. "What did you think I meant?"

She didn't answer.

"You thought I was talking about sex." His lips twisted. "You must be out of your head. I'm not that hard up."

"Men don't have to like a woman or even find her attractive to want sex. They only use us. You know that."

"I don't know that. And I don't like to be lumped in with the rest of mankind. It hurts my ego. Don't generalize."

"You're generalizing about me, aren't you? Whenever you spoke to Forbes about me, you were thinking, A woman like *her.*" She added fiercely, "Well, I'm not like anyone but myself, and I value who I am. You can hurt me, and you can use me, and I'll still be Elena Kyler. Not some whore or worthless piece of—"

"Shh," Galen whispered. "Hey, you're shaking so badly, you'll break my stitches."

"I'm not shaking."

"Sure you are. You're not well. Now that we've established that I'm not going to rape you, unbutton your shirt. You're not show-

ing me anything I didn't see when I stitched you up, and considering your background, you can't be that shy."

"Considering what kind of woman I am?"

"That really seems to be bothering you."

"I have *value.*"

"Who said you didn't?" He studied her face. "Or who acted as if you didn't? What happened to you in that prison?"

"Nothing that I didn't choose to happen. They wanted to break me. They didn't do it. They couldn't do it."

"You're telling me too much. It's the fever talking. You'll regret it when you're better." He sat down beside her and unbuttoned her shirt. "Just one look, and then I'll get out."

She sat ramrod straight, staring over his shoulder at the wall.

"Not too much blood on the bandage, and the stitches held. Not that I'd expect anything else." He buttoned her shirt again. "You said you'd been wounded before. How many times?"

"Badly?" She tried to think. "One bullet wound in the leg when I was twelve. Another in the arm when I was sixteen. A bayonet graze in my side when I was twenty."

His lips tightened. "Isn't it convenient that you can mark the rites of passage from childhood to adulthood by the wounds of war? I'm sure not many women can do that."

"And how did you mark your rites of passage, Galen?"

"You wouldn't want to know." He disappeared into the bathroom and came back with a glass of water. He opened the containers and handed her the pills. "Swallow them."

She swallowed the pills and set the glass on the table.

He paused before going through the curtains. "You have seven hours to nap and get that fever down. You wouldn't want me to have to carry you off the plane in San Francisco. Think how humiliating that would be."

"I'd take what I had to take from you."

He gazed at her thoughtfully for a moment. "You'd do anything for the boy, wouldn't you?"

"Anything."

"I could almost pity Forbes." He went through the curtains.

Elena lay back down and took a deep breath. She felt exhausted, and she wasn't sure if it was from the fever or dealing with Galen. She closed her eyes and tried to relax.

God, she hoped she wouldn't dream of Chavez.

"Is Elena all right?" Dominic asked as Galen dropped down in the seat beside him.

"Not exactly fighting fit." Galen glanced at Barry, who was now tucked under a blanket and sound asleep on a seat across the aisle. "But she won't admit it. I think she's been through more than she can handle right now."

"You're wrong. She can handle it," Dominic said. "I've never seen anything she couldn't work her way through, and I've known her since she was ten years old." He thought for a moment. "Well once, it was pretty close, but she found a way out."

"What happened?"

He smiled. "You'll have to ask her."

"Not bloody likely. She was with the rebels when she was ten?"

"She ran messages from one village to another when she was younger than that. Her father didn't start training her until she was a little older."

"Nice."

"He wasn't the best father in the world, but he was an excellent soldier. A good teacher too. Elena was remarkably skilled in the arts of war by the time she was twelve. Sad."

"Couldn't you stop it?"

He shook his head. "I was a guest in their camp. If I'd interfered, the rebels would have thrown me out. It was difficult for me, but I learned to compromise. I was able to teach, give comfort, and, every now and then, more concrete help."

"Like with Barry?"

"That was my joy and privilege." His brows lifted. "You're asking a lot of questions. Why?"

"I'm plagued with a curious mind."

"And Elena is an intriguing woman."

"Since she tried to kill me a minute after we first met, it's difficult to think of her as a woman."

"Then why are you so angry at the way her father raised her?"

"I don't like children being forced into grown-up games."

"As you were?"

Galen was silent a moment. "Are you fishing?"

"It's my nature." Dominic tilted his head. "You're an interesting man and probably better than you think you are."

Galen chuckled. "Dominic, I'm a cynical, selfish son of a bitch, who's dabbled in more sin than you could measure in a lifetime. Now, what about a game of checkers before Barry wakes up? It's going to be a long flight, and I easily get bored."

"TIME to get up."

Elena's eyes flew open to see Galen standing inside the curtains.

"It's okay. You have an hour before we land. Need any help?"

She shook her head and scrambled to a sitting position. "I'm fine."

Fifteen minutes later Elena sat down in the seat beside Forbes. "Where are you taking us?"

"I wanted to talk to you about that," Forbes said. "There's a place north of San Francisco in the wine country, a safe house. It used to be a working vineyard, but it's deserted now. I've made arrangements to have a team pick us up and drive us there."

She stiffened. "What team?"

"DEA." He went on hurriedly. "I know you didn't want the government involved, but I can't give you enough protection on my own."

"Do you know the men who'll be on this team?"

"I know the lead agent, and I've had the other men checked out, and they came up squeaky clean. You can trust them."

She shook her head. "You trust them. I can't afford to trust anyone. I don't have the right. I'm responsible for Barry and Dominic." She paused. "You drive. I'm not going with anyone else. You check out this vineyard yourself. Your team can follow us."

"We always check out a safe house before we bring in a subject. There's no need to worry, Elena. Chavez hasn't had time to find out anything."

"Will you ask Galen to come with us?"

"He doesn't like to work with federal agencies, and he's very expensive. I was lucky to persuade him to do the extraction."

"Will you ask him to just check over the security measures?"

"I'm surprised you want him. He's not been exactly warm to you."

"I don't want him. But he knows what he's doing. I'd use the devil himself if it meant keeping Barry safe."

Forbes stood up. "I'll ask him, but I doubt if it will do any good." Forbes came back five minutes later, shaking his head. "He said he was out of it, and it was my job now."

"It was worth a try." A few rows ahead, Galen was turning to look at her, and she met his gaze defiantly. He mustn't think she was pleading for help. I don't really need you, Galen. You were just an insurance policy.

He suddenly smiled, and she had the odd feeling he'd read her thoughts.

GALEN stood and watched Forbes drive the black sedan down the airport exit ramp, followed by the tan SUV with the DEA team.

Gone. Job finished. Time to move on.

Forbes was savvy, and Elena Kyler was tough. Let the two of them fight their battles with Chavez. He'd done his part. It was time to go fishing.

The idea left him with a curiously flat feeling. But then, it wasn't unusual for him to feel let down like this after a high-pressure job, and being around Elena had been like a shot of pure adrenaline. Too bad Chavez might end up killing her.

He saw Elena bend her head to listen to something the kid was saying to her.

Not his business.

The black sedan was almost out of sight.

Oh, what the hell. It wouldn't hurt to call Manero in Bogotá.

4

BARRY gave a relieved sigh when he saw the rolling hills of the vineyard country. "This is better. That city was . . . strange. Is this where we're going to live?"

Elena could understand why he would think San Francisco was alien. He had never been away from Dominic's little house, and the first excitement of the city had faded quickly. "No. This place belongs to Mr. Forbes's company. We may not stay here long."

"Will we go on the airplane again?"

"Maybe." Her gaze was focused on the building they were approaching. It was a two-story adobe hacienda with a red tile roof. Two iron balconies hung over a flagstone courtyard, and the place appeared as old and worn out as the brown vines of the vineyard.

Forbes pulled up to the front door. "I'll go inside and give it the once-over."

Elena stopped Barry from jumping out of the car. "Not yet. We have to make sure there aren't any bugs or snakes."

"Very apt description," Dominic murmured.

Forbes came out of the house five minutes later. "It's okay."

"Go on, Barry." Elena opened the door for him. "We're going to be sleeping in one of those rooms with the balcony. Why don't you go find it for me?"

Barry jumped out of the car and ran inside. "I'll go with him," Dominic said. "He's so excited, he'll jump off that balcony."

"I'll be there in a moment." Elena got out of the car. "Show me the back of the house, Forbes. What's that outbuilding?"

"Fermenting shed. It's where the vats are kept."

"Did you check it?"

"Of course." Forbes motioned to the men in the SUV, and they began to get out of the vehicle. "I'm not incompetent, Elena."

"I know. But I want to see the shed."

He shook his head with exasperation but started around the side of the house. "Come on, see for yourself. And it's not a good idea for you to occupy the balcony room. You're too accessible."

"If someone can climb in, I can climb out if I have to."

"I don't doubt it." He opened the door of the fermenting shed. "Here we are. As you can see, it's empty. Satisfied?"

The sweet-sour smell of wine and wood assaulted her as she stepped into the shed. "Not yet." The room was large, with six wooden vats at least twenty feet high and ten feet wide. "Will you have your men get a ladder and check those vats?"

"I was going to do that."

"And then get rid of the ladder."

"Right."

"Thanks." She went down the row and looked in back of each of the six vats. "Now I'm satisfied." She came toward him. "Tell me about those DEA men who came with us."

"Bill Carbonari's been an agent for ten years. He has two commendations. Jim Stokes has worked with me for three years. Mike Wilder served at the Mexican border for five. Randy Donahue has been with the agency for two, but he's sharp. Very sharp."

"I want you to introduce me. I want to know their faces and the way they move so well I'll be able to tell who they are in the dark."

"Why?"

"Why do you think? So I don't shoot the wrong man."

"Our job is to protect you. You won't have to shoot anyone."

"I want a gun. Galen never gave mine back."

He nodded. "Okay, I'll have one for you by this evening."

"IT'S a television set, Mama." Barry's eyes were shining. "And there are cartoons and Bugs Bunny and a big yellow bird and—"

"Hold it." She held up her hand. "You found all of those in the first thirty minutes you were here?"

"Dominic gave me a remote." He held up the device proudly. "It's magic." He ran back across the room to sit cross-legged before

the set. "You just press this button, and you can find anything."

"Oh, dear"—she smiled at Dominic—"you've created a monster. He'll never pick up a book again."

"It's only the novelty. When was the first time you saw a television set, Elena?"

"When I was nine. My father went to Bogotá to raise money for arms, and we stayed for six months." She turned toward the door. "I'm going down to the kitchen to see what I can find to cook for supper. Do you think we can pry him away?"

"We'll do it. Want me to help with the meal?"

"No. I want one of us to be with Barry at all times now."

"You don't trust Forbes."

"I trust him. He just hasn't seen how Chavez can corrupt and change people. People you'd never expect to betray you. We'll take turns being with Barry, okay?"

Dominic nodded.

EIGHT miles.

Chavez could feel the burn as he ran down the path and then started up the steep hill toward the huge house the villagers called a palace. This was the best part of the run, the hardest, the most challenging. It was during these last yards that he knew he'd conquered every trace of weakness.

He could see Gomez at the end of the driveway. He didn't stop, forcing Gomez to fall into step with him.

"It was definitely Forbes. A solo mission. No one in the agency knew anything about it until the woman was in the States."

"Where in the States?"

"I haven't been able to find out yet." Gomez was already getting short of breath. "Somewhere on the West Coast."

"If you've found out that much, then you can get me the rest. He wasn't alone. What did you learn about the helicopter?"

"It was rented by a mercenary, Ian Carmichael."

"And who hired him? Bring him in and find out."

"He seems to have disappeared off the face of the earth."

"Locate him." Chavez had reached the outbuilding that contained his gym, and he stopped and allowed himself a deep breath. "It's been a week, Gomez. You haven't been efficient. I think you're getting soft. Look at you huffing and puffing. Why don't you join me on the mats this morning?"

Gomez's eyes widened. "I have to get back to Bogotá. I've a lead on someone in the DEA's West Coast office."

"Then by all means hurry back." Chavez opened the door of the gym. "I'll have to make do with a young man I found among the paramilitary group." He gestured to the dark-skinned, beefy man sitting on a bench by the weight machine. "He's very strong. What do you think, Gomez? Can he take me?"

"No."

"I don't believe he can either." Chavez could feel excitement tingle through him. "But he may make the morning interesting."

"CHAVEZ has gone to his place in the hills," Jose Manero said.

"He didn't come to the U.S.?" Galen asked. "You're sure?"

"Gomez has been the only one stirring. He's been to Bogotá four times in the last three weeks, asking questions. But I haven't been able to track him for the last day or two."

Galen stiffened. "Could he have left the country?"

"It's possible. He's being very quiet."

"Tell me about Gomez. He's Chavez's number one man?"

"If Chavez has such a thing. He likes to be totally in control. Gomez was a hit man in Caracas for four years before Chavez picked him up. He's not a genius, but he's canny."

"Let me know if he surfaces." Galen hung up. He didn't like this. Forbes had hoped Chavez would come running, but sending a competent underling after Elena and her son made much more sense.

THERE was a full moon shining over the hills. Elena leaned against the wall of the courtyard.

"Is the boy asleep?" Forbes had stopped beside her.

"Probably. Dominic is with him."

"And I take it you're not out here enjoying the scenery? You go over this place every evening like a sentry on duty."

"Habits die hard." She shrugged. "You're disappointed, aren't you? You thought Chavez would be here by now."

"I hoped he would be," said Forbes.

"Perhaps he's on his way."

"No. My informants say he's still in Colombia."

"Then maybe you think I lied to you."

"No." He paused. "But you may have overestimated Chavez's reaction to you taking his son."

"That's one thing I didn't do. He'll come."

Forbes hesitated. "I don't know how long I can keep a protective watch on you without proof there's need."

She stiffened. "You're going to leave me alone?"

"Not if I can persuade my superiors that we have a valid chance of catching Chavez. I'll do my best."

She had known this might happen, but not this soon. "Will you still get false ID for Dominic, Barry, and me?"

Another hesitation. "I'm a federal officer, and you're in this country illegally."

She lifted her chin. "I understand."

He stared at her for a moment and then muttered an oath. "You'll get your ID. Just don't tell me where you're going to go. But I'll see if I can buy more time. Coming in?"

"Not yet. I have to do some thinking."

"I guess you do. Sorry." He started to turn away.

"Forbes."

He looked back at her.

"Thank you. You're a fine man. I won't forget you helping me."

He shrugged. "I like the kid. I don't want Chavez to get hold of him." He smiled and strode back into the house.

"CHAVEZ is still at the compound. The Delgados are paying a return visit. He gave a party for the Brothers Grimm and their wives three days ago," Manero said. "Gomez did not attend."

"Then where is he?" Galen asked.

"No word."

No word. The answer repeated in Galen's mind after he hung up. Manero was a good man, and his sources were excellent. If he couldn't unearth information, Gomez was planning something and making sure no one got wind of it.

What was he up to? Where was he?

BILL Carbonari was standing at the rear door of the house when she rounded the corner. "It's okay, Ms. Kyler. I checked it." He smiled. "What am I saying? You'll do it anyway."

"No offense."

"None taken." Carbonari was pleasant and appeared fairly alert. She could feel his gaze on her back as she walked down the path toward the fermenting shed.

Inside the shed, she swung her flashlight from side to side as she walked down the aisle between the huge vats. Nothing. Nothing but the wooden cylinders and the sound of her own footsteps.

She stopped short, her gaze searching the darkness behind the last vat. She had caught sight of something gleaming, something metal. An aluminum ladder. There hadn't been any ladder in this room since that first night she'd asked Forbes to check the vats.

She ran forward, kicked the ladder, and brought it crashing to the ground. She raced for the door.

A noise behind her, inside the vat. She was outside, running for the house. "Carbonari! Call Forbes—"

Carbonari was lying on the ground, and a man was standing over him. The man whirled and blocked the blow she aimed at his head. "Dammit, stop trying to murder me. I'm here to help you."

Galen.

"By killing Carbonari?"

"All I know is, I saw him draw his gun and head for the shed right after you went in. He didn't appear to be looking for wine."

"Someone's in the vat. I knocked down the ladder but—"

"Hurry. Get the kid." He grabbed her arm and pulled her toward

the house. "I'll bet Gomez will be driving up with reinforcements any time now."

"Gomez?"

"He's been camping out in the hills," he said, entering the house. Galen was climbing the steps two at a time. "I checked out all the nearby hotels and then went scouting for the last few days. I ran across them—surprise, surprise. Where's Forbes?"

"Second door on your right."

"And Dominic?"

"With Barry."

"Then get them out of the house and down to the vineyards. Avoid Forbes's men. I don't know if anyone besides Carbonari is on the take. Hide beyond the first rise of the hill until I come."

"What are you going to do?"

But he was gone, disappearing into Forbes's room.

"I PROMISED her they'd be safe, Galen," Forbes said dully.

"She will be safe, if we get out of here before Gomez shows up."

"I checked out Carbonari. I thought he was the best of the lot. What the hell are you doing?"

Galen was setting fire to the velvet draperies. "We need a distraction when Gomez shows up. You do the same in the kitchen. I want this whole place blazing."

"Why?"

"Would you want to face Chavez if you were responsible for letting his kid burn up? Gomez will try to get inside to make sure Barry isn't here." He glanced out the window. "Here they come. . . . About three miles away. Move it, Forbes."

"IT'S burning, Mama," Barry whispered, his eyes fastened on the hacienda. "The house is burning."

"Shh, I'll explain later, baby. You be very quiet. Okay?"

Where was Galen? She could give him a few minutes more, and then she would have to start moving Barry and Dominic out of this field toward the road.

No, not the road. She could see the headlights of a car racing toward the house.

Gomez.

"COME on, Forbes." Galen turned toward the door. "Time to get out of here."

"I can't leave my agents. I have to check on my men."

"Why didn't they come running when they saw the fire?"

"It's been only minutes. They can't all belong to Chavez."

"I'm not saying they do. But there could have been another agent on the take. Let's get out of here. Or do you want Elena caught by that son of a bitch?"

Forbes hesitated, then headed for the back door. "Let's go."

"Good. We go alongside the house, then head for the vineyard."

Thick smoke poured out of the house. Galen's eyes scanned the road. The headlights were closer.

"If I'm not there in a few minutes, get Elena out," Forbes said.

Galen turned to see that Forbes had stopped at the corner of the house. "Don't be an idiot."

"The smoke will cover me, and I know exactly where they're stationed. I won't leave them for Gomez. They're my responsibility."

"For God's sake, Forbes, don't take the risk."

"Get Elena out." Forbes darted around the side of the house.

Galen started to go after him, then stopped with a muttered curse. No time. He took off at a run for the vineyard.

Shots. Behind him.

FORBES'S head was almost blown off by the barrage of bullets.

My God.

Elena felt sick. She quickly buried Barry's head in her shoulder and looked at Dominic. "Did he see it?" she asked unevenly.

"I don't think so." Dominic's lips tightened. "I wish I hadn't."

"Let's get the hell out of here." Galen was suddenly beside them. "My car is parked over that hill, in the trees."

"Forbes—"

"Move."

Galen didn't speak again until they were in his car and driving down the road that led to the highway. "How's Barry?"

"Scared." Her arms tightened around the little boy on her lap. "But he's being very good, aren't you, baby? He'll be fine."

Barry didn't speak, only nestled closer into her arms.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"I'm taking you to a friend's apartment in the city for the night."

"Forbes." She looked at Barry. He seemed to be too stunned to pay attention, but she kept her voice at a whisper. "It was one of his own agents. It was Wilder. I saw Wilder raise his gun."

"I'm sure he'll be well paid."

"I liked Forbes."

Galen's lips tightened. "So did I."

THE apartment was a penthouse that overlooked the San Francisco Bay, and it was the most luxurious place Elena had ever seen. The living room was exceptional—beige velvet couches, deep burgundy carpets, and one wall that was all window.

"Several bedrooms with baths." Galen gestured to the south wing. "Why don't you find a cozy place for the three of you while I make a pot of coffee?"

Cozy? That was the last term she'd use for this place, Elena thought wearily. "I'll talk to you after I put Barry to bed."

"I thought you would. This place is kind of big. I'll leave a trail of breadcrumbs to the kitchen."

"I'll find you." She moved down the hall. "Come on, Barry."

"This is a strange place." Barry's eyes were big as he gazed at the glass wall. "Can you see the whole world from here?"

"No. Only the city and the Bay."

"Oh."

He didn't speak again while she got him undressed and tucked into a king-size bed in one of the guest rooms. He was too quiet, she thought worriedly. She sat beside him on the bed. "Okay?"

He nodded and closed his eyes.

It wasn't okay. "Barry, bad things happened tonight, but we're all safe now. Nothing can hurt you."

His eyes opened. "Who did it, Mama?"

"Bad men. Bad men do bad things."

"It was burning. . . ."

"I know. But we're safe now." She pressed a kiss on his forehead. "I'd never let anything happen to you. Don't you know that?"

He didn't answer for a moment. "This was an adventure, wasn't it? I didn't like this adventure, Mama."

"Neither did I. Sometimes adventures aren't very much fun."

"I didn't know that."

She could feel the tears sting her eyes. "There are wonderful adventures too."

"I guess so." He turned over and closed his eyes. "Mr. Forbes wasn't in that fire, was he?"

"No."

"Good. I was worried. He's a nice man."

"Yes. Go to sleep, love. In the morning everything will be bright and beautiful, and all the adventures will be happy ones."

"I hope so." He dropped off to sleep.

5

"HOW'S the boy?" Galen asked as she came into the kitchen.

"Not good." She sat down at the granite-topped table. "But he didn't see Forbes killed. I was afraid he had."

"He saw enough to disturb most kids." He poured her a cup of coffee and sat down across from her. "Don't try to smooth things over. You need to be up front with him."

She lifted her cup to her lips. "He's five years old."

"And you want to protect him. But you may not be able to. It's better if he knows that you'll always tell him the truth."

"And you're an expert?" she asked sarcastically. "Why did you come to the vineyard? I thought you were going fishing."

"So did I. I've always had problems letting go. At first I was only going to keep a watch and see if Chavez made a move."

"Why would you do that?"

He looked down into his coffee. "Ben Forbes and I go back a long way. I thought it wouldn't hurt to keep an eye on things. Then, when Gomez went incommunicado, I decided to go up to the valley and see if there was a stakeout. I had a hunch. I believe in hunches."

So did Elena. "And then you came to the house to warn us."

"But I got there when things were already happening. Carbonari had evidently let some of Gomez's men into the fermenting shed and didn't like you getting in the way."

"It was stupid of him not to put the ladder away."

"I wonder if the fermenting shed caught fire." Galen tilted his head. "It would be pleasant to think of Gomez's men in that vat, slowly roasting."

"You'd like to kill them?"

"Oh, yes."

Her hand tightened on her cup. "I have to find a way to keep Barry and Dominic safe. They won't be safe long in this place."

"Don't be so scornful of Logan's pad. It has top-notch security. But I agree that penthouses aren't the best safe houses. There's only one way out, and that's down."

"You could always arrange another helicopter pickup."

"You almost smiled then."

"Did I?"

"Yes, but it's gone again." He leaned back. "Go ahead. Ask."

"Ask what?"

"I'm not going to make this easy. You've already been a pot of trouble for me. I want the words."

She was silent for a moment. "I'm alone here. I need help."

"You could call the DEA."

"Forbes tried that. I need your help. You have contacts and experience. You could keep Barry safe—if you wanted to do it."

"And what do I get out of it?"

She met his gaze. "Anything you want. Tell me, and I'll find a way to get it for you."

"How can I resist an offer like that?" he said, his expression mocking as ever, but she sensed the anger.

"You're not supposed to resist it. You want to be paid; you'll be paid. So what do you want?"

"I'll decide later. Maybe you can knock off some old enemy."

Her lips tightened. "I could do it. My father used to send me out to clear the way before the troops moved out."

"Clear the way?"

"Find and kill any snipers. He taught me well."

"Bully for him." Galen got to his feet. "You know, I don't think I would have liked your father."

"I loved him."

"That makes it worse. Go to bed. I have some phoning to do."

"You're going to help us?"

"Yes, I'm going to help you. I have a ranch in southern Oregon that should fit the bill as far as security is concerned. I buried the paperwork on the place, and it should be extremely difficult for anyone to find out I own it. It should give us a little time to make plans." He stared her in the eye. "And you're going to do everything I tell you to do. That's the only way I play the game."

"If I think what you're doing is right for us."

He shook his head.

She bit her lower lip. "All right. If you don't do anything stupid."

"And for your cooperation, I'm going to give you a bonus. I'm going to give you Chavez's head on a platter. I'm very irritated with him. He killed two of my men. But that was business. Forbes was more . . . personal. I think it's time Chavez took the fall."

"You may be disappointed. Chavez didn't come after Barry."

"Chavez wouldn't risk his neck if he could risk someone else's. But Gomez failed. It's not likely Chavez will trust anyone else again. I think Chavez will come." He smiled grimly. "And he's not going to survive to spill his guts to the DEA. Not that he would have anyway."

She stiffened. "What do you mean?"

"You'd have killed him. You wouldn't have chanced him bribing himself out of jail. And you wouldn't have risked Barry being drawn into any messy courtrooms."

"You didn't tell Forbes you thought I'd do that."

"Why should I interfere?" He moved toward the door. "Good night. Don't be afraid to go to sleep. Logan's alarm system is awesome, and I'll be up most of the night."

"FORBES is dead," Gomez said.

"And you have my son," Chavez said. "Of course."

Gomez hesitated. "We will soon. There was a problem."

Chavez smothered the surge of rage. "Problem?"

"She must have been warned. They set fire to the place and were gone before we got there."

"How could she have been warned? Unless you were so exceptionally clumsy as to have been spotted."

"We were careful. It should have gone smoothly."

"Don't tell me how it should have gone. Where is my son?"

"Our contact at the DEA says they're in the dark about it," Gomez said. "But I think I know who got them away from the vineyard. We caught up with Carmichael in Rio. It took a little time, but he talked. Sean Galen got them out of Colombia. If the DEA didn't pull her out of the safe house, Galen did it. He's our strongest lead."

"Then follow it." Chavez lowered his voice to silky softness. "And don't phone again and tell me you've failed me, Gomez. The minute you zero in on them, I want to know."

"It may take time. Galen works alone. It will be hard to—"

Chavez hung up on him.

Whining bastard. He didn't want excuses. He wanted his son.

He drew a deep breath and tried to rid himself of the anger. Two more days, and the Delgados and their network would be in his pocket. Then he would be free to finish this business himself. He was the only one strong enough to defeat Elena. He had done it once, and he would do it again.

Elena lying on the mat, her eyes blazing up at him.

The memory gave him a burst of pleasure. He was almost glad Gomez had failed. He had forgotten the sheer enjoyment of making her submit to him. He had never felt stronger or more the conqueror than in those last days with her. It would be good to have a little quality time with Elena before he cut her heart out.

"IT'S beautiful." Elena looked at the blue mountains in the distance. "I've never seen anything like this. It's so . . . wild."

"And Colombia isn't?" Galen leaned out the window and punched in the number on the electronic gates. "But I know what you mean. Barrenness has a power of its own."

"It's not really barren," Dominic said. "A little stark. Is it your ranch?"

"Yes." Galen drove through the gates, and they swung closed behind the Jeep. "I occasionally come up here to relax."

"When was the last time you came here?" Elena asked.

He thought about it. "About six months ago . . . I think."

"Then you must not need to relax very often."

He shrugged. "I get bored."

"I bet you do." Her glance shifted. "This place is huge."

"I never liked to rough it. I did it too much as a kid. In Liverpool." He parked in front of the long wraparound porch and got out of the Jeep. "Come on, Barry. I'll show you the barn. There's a hayloft you'll appreciate."

"You can never tell what kind of creatures may be in that hay," Elena said.

"It's clean." A man dressed in jeans and a denim shirt had come out of the house. "When Galen called, I bought a few bales."

Elena went rigid. "It's okay," Galen told her quickly. "This is Judd Morgan. He's harmless. He's sort of caretaker here."

He didn't look harmless. He appeared to be in his mid-thirties, was tall and lean, and gave the impression of whipcord strength. Pale blue eyes were set in a hard, chiseled face.

"How do you do?" Morgan said. "The boy will be all right. I

cleaned out the barn two weeks ago, and the only varmints are the kittens and Mac, my German shepherd. He's gentle."

"A puppy?" Barry's eyes lit up.

"Well, not exactly a puppy. He only acts like one."

"This is Dominic Sanders," Galen said solemnly. "He was once a priest. I brought him here to save your soul."

"I'll let him practice on you. I'm a bigger challenge." Morgan shook Dominic's hand. "Galen, any news for me from Logan?"

Galen shook his head. "Not yet."

"Damn." He turned back toward the house. "I'll show you to your rooms. It's a surprisingly nice place considering Galen's lack of good taste."

"Mama, may I go to the barn?" Barry asked.

She couldn't resist the eagerness in his expression. "For a little while. You need a bath before dinner."

"He'll have plenty of time." Galen took his hand, and they turned away. "I'm planning a gourmet meal for our first night."

Morgan led Elena and Dominic into the house. A cathedral ceiling gave the living room an open, airy look, and the chenille-upholstered furniture provided a contrasting coziness.

"Five bedrooms, four baths on the second floor," Morgan said. "Game room, library, kitchen, dining room, living room on the main. Do you want the grand tour or to see just your bedrooms?"

"The bedrooms," Elena said.

Morgan nodded and led them up the staircase. "The first bedroom on the right has a smaller adjoining room. I thought you'd want to take that one for you and the boy."

Elena nodded. "That will be fine."

Morgan gestured to a door across the hall. "Your room, Mr. Sanders. If either of you has any problems or questions, let me know. I'll see you at dinner." He turned and left.

"Interesting man." Dominic was looking after him. "And an interesting contrast between him and Galen."

"I don't like Galen not telling us about him," Elena said.

"You would have objected to anyone you didn't know. Maybe

Galen thought it would be more reassuring if you met him first."

Reassuring was not a word she'd use in connection with Morgan. She crossed the hall to a window. She could see the large barn from here. Her gaze lifted to the surrounding countryside. You could see for miles and miles. Was that why Galen had bought this property? She'd received the impression from Forbes that Galen's past had been shady, at best. Was he so wary that even when he relaxed, he needed to know what was coming toward him?

My God, was she feeling sorry for him?

BARRY came running into the house an hour later. "Mama!"

"Here." She came to the head of the staircase. "Did you enjoy it?" Straw was sticking out of his hair, and his expression was glowing. "How many kittens were there?"

"Three." He ran up the stairs. "But the dog . . . Mac. He rolled over and let me rub his belly."

"What an honor." She smiled. "Looks like you rolled over too."

"Galen and I had a straw fight, and he threw me on top of the stack. Then I couldn't fight anymore, because I was laughing. He said he's making duck orange for dinner. Have you eaten that?"

"No."

"I've got to help. Where's the bathroom? He said I couldn't touch anything in his kitchen until I had a bath."

She nodded at the suite, then followed him into the bedroom and gestured to the bathroom. "In there. I'll get some clean clothes from your room. It's right through that door. Our rooms are connected."

"Good." Barry's tone was abstracted. "Galen said if he saw one piece of straw, I was out of there. Will you help me?"

"Of course. I'll see that you pass inspection. You like Galen?"

"Sure. He makes things . . . different."

He meant exciting. Why wouldn't he think Galen was some kind of magician? He'd flown through the air with him and then been whisked to the top of a great city. Now Barry had the elements of every boy's dream: a dog and cats and a hayloft.

He was staring at her, troubled. "You like him too, don't you?"

After all the sleight of hand and wondrous tricks, Galen would vanish. But how could she say that, when he had single-handedly banished Barry's fear and uncertainty? She owed him a debt, dammit. "Why wouldn't I like him?" she asked lightly. "After all, he's going to teach you how to cook me a fancy dinner."

"COME on, young man. Time for bed." Dominic stood up from the table. "Your face is falling into that chocolate mousse."

Barry stood up, yawning. "I stirred the chocolate, you know."

"It's been called to our attention," Dominic said. "A great meal, Galen. I've never had better in the finest restaurants."

"Of course not," Galen said. "I told you I was a master."

Judd Morgan snorted. "It's getting thick in here. I need air."

"And leave me with the dishes?"

"I'll help," Barry said.

Galen shook his head. "I believe in specialized labor. I have you scheduled for omelette duty at breakfast tomorrow."

Barry yawned again. "Okay."

Elena watched Dominic and Barry leave the dining room before she rose to her feet. "I'll wash the dishes."

Morgan shook his head. "My job. Galen cooks; I clean up." He started to stack the dishes. "Though if he didn't have a great dishwasher, I'd take you up on it."

"Then I'll help," Elena said.

"No, you won't. I like to work alone." He carried the dishes into the kitchen.

"He's not rejecting you. He's telling the truth. He likes to do everything alone," Galen said as he stood up. "That's why he likes staying here. I guess it's his artistic temperament."

"He's an artist? I would never have guessed."

"He has an oil painting in the library. Grant you, he doesn't look the part. What would you think he does for a living?"

"I don't know. Maybe the same thing you do."

He smiled. "Close. But Judd was more specialized."

"You appear to get along very well."

"We understand each other. In many ways we're a lot alike."

She shook her head. "You're nothing alike."

"You don't think I'm the artistic, solitary type?"

"I don't know what type of person you are." She studied him. His dark eyes were sparkling. "Do you?"

"I know exactly who I am. I just dislike sharing it with all and sundry. Do you want to see Judd's painting? Or maybe you've had a look around already?"

"No, just the upstairs." She followed him from the room. "This is quite a place. I'd think you'd use it more often."

"I get restless." He opened a paneled door. "This is the library. It's the one room Judd totally approves of."

Books everywhere. "So do I." She went into the room and caressingly touched the leather spine of a book on the shelf closest to the door. "You couldn't get a room with this many books wrong."

"You like to read?"

"I love it." She went around looking at titles. Everything from classics to how-to manuals. "When I was a kid, there was no way I had access to TV, but my father got me books."

"On the reward system? Shoot a sniper, read a book?"

She flinched. "You don't understand. My father wasn't a heartless monster. He came to Colombia as a mercenary with the rebels, and he stayed as a patriot. He met my mother, and he learned to love her and her country. After she was killed by government troops, he became obsessed with the rebel cause. He couldn't give it up, and he wanted to keep me and Luis with him."

"Where is Luis now?"

She looked away from him. "He's still with the rebels."

"I take it you're not close."

"No." She touched another cover. "*Macbeth.* Do you like Shakespeare?"

"Culture? Me? I bought the entire stock at an estate auction."

"Really?"

"Why should that surprise you?"

"It only surprises me you feel it necessary to lie to me."

"Why do you think I'm lying to you?"

"Aren't you?"

He was silent a moment. "I did buy the library at an auction. But I examined every book before I bid. I do like Shakespeare. He understood human frailties. Are you satisfied now?"

"No, because I think you lied so I wouldn't feel uncomfortable. Don't feel sorry for me. I've led a rough life, and I haven't had any formal education, but I'm not ashamed of what—"

"Shh." His fingers were across her lips. "I don't feel sorry for you. I was kicked out of more schools than you can count. I was the most ignorant rowdy on the face of the planet. If I wasn't honest, it was my built-in camouflage coming into play."

She turned her head away to avoid the touch of his hand. She stepped back. "Why? You don't care what I think."

"It appears I do. What a surprise." He nodded at the wall behind her. "That's Judd's painting."

As she turned around, she felt a surge of relief that he'd changed the subject. She didn't like what she was feeling. The painting was a small landscape of the hills surrounding the ranch. But its effect was like a stormy burst of lightning. "It's wonderful."

"It reminds me of an El Greco. I don't tell Judd that, because he'd be insulted."

"Because he likes to do things alone. And in his own way."

Galen nodded. "We all like to be considered unique. And he is unique, of course. He's been concentrating on his art since he came here. He has to stay out of the limelight a while."

"Why?"

"He wants to stay alive." Galen smiled. "Judd used to do sanctions for the CIA. He was exceptionally good, and they chose him to take out a North Korean general. Unfortunately, the present administration decided that it was a mistake and that the man who did it should have his head served up as a sacrifice to diplomacy."

"So he's hiding out?"

"Until my friend Logan manages to pull some strings in Washington. He's got a lot of clout, but it could take time."

"Aren't you running a risk helping him?"

He shrugged. "I always liked Judd." He took her elbow. "I'll show you the rest of the house. The game room's kind of fun. I don't suppose you play pool?"

"No."

"Didn't think so. Not that many pool halls in the jungle. I'm a fantastic teacher."

"Is there anything you're not fantastic at?"

"Can't think of anything." He opened another door. "You're going to like this. It's right up your— What's wrong?"

It was a gym. Mirrored walls and metal equipment.

And the mat lying on the floor.

"You're white as a sheet. What's wrong?"

The mat.

"Nothing." She moistened her lips. "I need to go to bed."

"Not until you tell me what—" He stopped as he saw her shaking, and said roughly, "For God's sake, get out of here."

"I will." She ran out of the room and up the stairs. She barely made it to the bathroom before she threw up. Stupid to be this feeble. It was the shock. She hadn't been in a gym in six years. She hadn't realized all those memories would come flooding back.

The mat.

She felt the sweat break out on her forehead.

6

ELENA'S hand clenched the banister as she started down the stairs. The house was in darkness, but there was enough moonlight streaming in the windows for her to dimly make out the furniture in the living room. And the hall leading to the gym.

She reached the bottom of the staircase and paused, her stomach muscles twisting. Don't think. Just do it.

But she had to think. She couldn't block it out, or he'd win.

She moved slowly down the hall.

The mat.

She could see it in her mind. And Chavez's face above her.

She leaned against the wall and breathed deeply. Her heart was pounding hard, painfully. Just a few more steps.

She was there. She searched blindly for the knob and threw the door open. Go in. Look at it.

She went forward and stood over the mat. It didn't mean anything. It was a piece of cloth and padding.

If it didn't mean anything, why was she shaking as she'd done when she had malaria? Why were tears running down her cheeks? She sank to the floor. If she ran away, he would win.

Stay until the pain went away. That's all she needed to do. Look at it. Remember. He can't hurt you unless you let him.

Dear God, she wished she could stop shaking.

"COME on," Galen said roughly. "You're getting out of here."

She looked up to see him standing before her.

He held out his hand. "I don't know what you're doing, but I'm not standing around and watching you."

She shook her head. "Go away."

"You've been in here over an hour, and I'm tired of being patient and understanding. I'm not waiting any longer."

"I don't want your understanding. It's none of your business."

"It's my house, and as long as you're here, you're my business."

"Have . . . to stay . . . here."

He gazed at her for a moment. "Damn." He dropped down beside her and leaned against the mirror. "Okay, we both stay."

She shook her head. "I have to do it alone."

"Bull." He tossed her his handkerchief. "Stop crying, okay?"

"I'm not—"

"I've had a rough night. I don't know what's happening to you, but I don't like it. And I don't like feeling like this. I want to go to bed and forget about you."

"Do it."

"I can't, so stop communing with that damn mat, and let's go get a cup of coffee."

"I'm not communing—" Anger surged through her. "You make me sound like a crazy woman." She struggled to her feet. "What a complete ass you are, Galen." She moved toward the door.

It wasn't until she was out in the hall that a relief that made her go limp replaced the anger. She reached out blindly for the wall.

"Easy." Galen's arm was around her, supporting her, leading her toward the kitchen. "Don't fight. You might hurt me."

"Ass." She was still shaking and felt as weak as a kitten.

"You keep calling me that." He pushed her down into a chair at the table and turned on the light. "It's not very polite. Stay here. I'll get a throw from the sofa." In a minute he was back, tucking a sage chenille throw around her.

She watched him pour steaming coffee into two cups. "Why was the coffee already made?"

"I was in the living room when you came downstairs. You didn't look so good. I thought you might need it." He brought the cups to the table. "I didn't realize you'd decide to set up camp in there."

The throw felt warm. "You should have left me alone."

"You were in pain. I have a problem with that." He sat down across from her. "You're still in pain."

"I'm *not* in pain. I won't let him hurt me again."

"Okay. Okay. Whatever. I don't suppose you'd like to tell me what's going on with you?"

"No."

"We could drag that mat outside and start a bonfire."

She shook her head.

"I could let Judd draw a bull's-eye and use it as a target. You'd be doing him a favor. He's probably out of practice."

She stared at him in exasperation and then revealed the hint of a smile. "Ass."

"Okay, you're better. Drink your coffee."

He was right. Her hand was no longer shaking. She lifted the cup

to her lips. The coffee was hot and tasted good. She set the cup down and leaned back in the chair. "Why were you sitting in the dark?"

"You ran away. You were scared. But I knew you wouldn't allow yourself to cower in your room."

"And you were curious?"

"You might say that."

But it wouldn't be the truth. She knew he had waited because he wanted to help her. By making light of her agony, he'd made her angry, and the anger had freed her.

He was studying her expression. "You're not going to start bristling, are you?"

"No."

"I heard sometimes it helps to talk about it. I promise not to blackmail you."

"You couldn't. It was important only to me."

"Maybe if you let it out . . ." He shrugged. "Only a suggestion."

"You'd be bored."

"But it might save me some late nights waiting for you to wander downstairs for a midnight tryst with that dumb mat."

Her hands clenched. "I can't let Chavez win. I can't let him make me afraid. I thought I'd put it all behind me."

"Chavez? Did you have an affair with Chavez?"

"Chavez doesn't have relationships with women. He chose his wife as a slave and childbearer. His mistress is the same."

"And you?"

"He found me different. At first he was amused; then he wasn't amused at all." She stopped. What the hell. Let it all out. She wasn't ashamed. "I was nineteen, and the situation with the rebel band I belonged to had changed. They had begun taking money from Chavez. He was distributing drugs among the soldiers, gaining influence, using us as puppets. I hated it. My father had died the previous year, and I was thinking of leaving Colombia. But I waited too long. I was very good at my job, and Chavez heard about me and thought it would be interesting to take a woman to his little playground."

"Playground?"

"Chavez likes to consider himself a conqueror. When he was in his teens, he was with a paramilitary group. He was brilliant with weapons and found the idea of being a killing machine very appealing. He left the army for the drug trade, but he wanted the best of both worlds." She moistened her lips. "Now he keeps himself fit at a gym he built, a fine gym, with every exercise machine you could think of. But he needed combat to give him the rush he needed. So he coerced or paid members of the different rebel groups to spar with him. He had no trouble besting most of them."

"What happened to the ones he couldn't beat?"

"He kept them there until he could defeat them. Most of them died. But then, most of the others died too. Fighting to the death made him feel exhilarated."

"He took you to this gym?"

"Took me? I was delivered to him by my own people, paid for with a tidy bundle of cocaine. I was there for three weeks." She was beginning to shake again. "He found me a challenge. Every night he'd fight me. Unarmed combat—karate, judo, street fighting . . . It didn't matter how dirty. The only rules were the length of the session. Two hours. If he got me down and pinned me, he would win. I wouldn't let him do it." She drew a deep breath. "But there was one way he felt all-powerful. After all, I was a woman. At the end of that two hours he'd have me tied down, and he'd rape me."

"Son of a bitch."

"It was hideous. The first few times he did that to me, I was too stunned to think. Then I tried to pretend that I was giving up and he was getting the better of me. I guess it was too sudden. He knew I was faking it. He brought in a young boy—he wasn't more than fourteen—and he fought him in front of me. He killed him. He told me that every time I tried to cheat him, he would do the same thing." She swallowed hard. "I knew I'd die if I couldn't get out of there. But I let it go on, and I tried to be patient. Then one night I let him win. I'll never forget his face. I knew the next time we fought, he wouldn't be satisfied with taking me down. He'd want to kill me. I was right. He told me that the next session he'd introduce knives." She drew a

shaky breath. "That night I escaped and hid out in the hills. I kept away from our group, but I managed to find Dominic. He gave me money and told me he'd meet me in a month in Tomaco."

"But you found out you were pregnant?"

"I wouldn't admit it to myself until I was almost four months. I hated my swollen body and his child inside me. It was as if he'd finally found a way to beat me."

"And when Barry was born?"

"I wouldn't even look at him. Dominic took care of him while we were trying to find a home for him. Then when Barry was about six weeks old, Dominic was down with the flu." She paused, remembering. "I sat rocking the baby, and he smiled at me. I know they're not supposed to smile at that age, but Barry did smile. It wasn't like any smile I'd ever seen. I think God wanted him to tell me something."

"That you should take care of him?"

"No. That he was his own soul and deserved a chance." She smiled. "It's a beautiful soul, Galen. From the beginning he was full of love and wonder. There's nothing of that monster in Barry."

"I believe you."

"You don't really know him. He's . . . special."

"And you're afraid Chavez would change him?"

"No. Barry has a strong, loving nature, and I don't believe it can be twisted. But what Chavez can't conquer, he destroys."

"How did Chavez find out about Barry?"

"Dominic kept contact in the rebel group. We were betrayed."

"By whom?"

She didn't answer for a moment. "My brother, Luis. He works as an informant for Chavez now. Luis has been on drugs for years."

"Chavez again. It must have been tough for you."

She nodded. "I loved Luis. You can't just turn feeling off and on. God knows I've tried." She pushed her chair back. "I'm going to bed. Good night."

"Good night." Galen rose to his feet and followed her out into the hall. "Try to have pleasant dreams."

"Sometimes you can't control your dreams." She started up the

stairs, then she turned to face him. "You've been kind tonight."

"All I did was listen."

"No. You did more than that. I'll remember."

"I don't suppose you're going to be sensible and stay out of that gym from now on?"

She shook her head. "I have to find a way of freeing myself."

"Then I guess I'll have to think of a way of speeding up the process. All this lingering gloom depresses me."

"You have nothing to do with this."

"That's what I keep telling myself." He met and held her eyes. "It's not working."

She went still. She couldn't tear away her gaze.

"Go to bed." He turned away. "I have to go wash those cups. A man's job is never done."

She gazed after him. He hadn't touched her, hadn't said a word that wasn't simply meant to comfort her. Yet that single glance was enough to cause a wave of heat to tingle through her.

She started up the stairs again.

GALEN sat down in a kitchen chair and dialed Manero. Although it was late, he picked up immediately.

"What's the word on Chavez?"

"Still in Colombia. The Delgados left this morning, and I've been told the departure was very cordial."

"And Gomez?"

"No sign of him." Manero paused. "But there have been questions about you buzzing around the grapevine. Tender, caring little inquiries like, how to get to you, who to pay off to bring Chavez your head, where you might be."

"Make sure you let Chavez find out my phone number. It will make him feel like he's getting somewhere, and I want to encourage his initiative."

"Chavez doesn't need encouragement."

"The tiger always needs to feel he's the only predator. It makes him careless. Call me if Chavez moves out." Galen hung up and

leaned back in his chair. The rage he had felt as he listened to Elena was still strong. It had been a long time since he'd wanted to kill a man this much, and hatred caused a man to make mistakes.

BARRY was laughing.

Elena smiled as she started down the stairs. He and Dominic must have awakened before her this morning. He sounded like he was having a wonderful—

The laughter was coming from the gym.

She stopped in shock and then slowly continued down the steps and the hall. "Barry?" she called.

"Mama, come quick. I'm turning somersaults."

"I see you are." She stood in the doorway. Barry and Galen were on the mat, and he was helping the little boy flip over. She wanted to snatch Barry up. She wanted to kill Galen.

"Watch me, Mama."

Galen met her gaze. "Yes, watch him, Mama. The mat will cushion him." He turned to Barry. "Okay, try a handspring."

"Are you watching, Mama?"

"I'm watching, Barry."

She watched him for ten minutes. She watched him do somersaults. She watched him do handsprings. She watched him collapse into giggles when Galen slyly tickled him.

Galen finally set him on his feet. "Enough of this horseplay. Go wash your hands and get into the kitchen. We've got work to do."

"I know. Omelettes," Barry said as he ran to Elena. His cheeks were scarlet, and his dark eyes glittered with excitement. "Did you see me? I did the last handspring by myself."

"You were wonderful." She kissed him. "A regular acrobat."

"I *like* this place." He ran down the hall to the bathroom.

"Let's get it over with." Galen reached for a towel draped on one of the machines. "Barry will wonder where I am."

"You're an interfering bastard."

"Yes. I told you I didn't like clouds hovering over me."

"I wanted to throw up when I saw Barry on that mat."

"It was chancy." He wiped the back of his neck. "But you liked seeing Barry happy. I've promised him a workout every morning. I think he'd like you to be there."

"THE telephone is in the name of Desmond Sprull, phony address in Las Vegas. We can't trace Galen by the number."

"And since you don't know where he is, Gomez, you can't get close enough to put a trace on his calls," Chavez said. "It's a wonder you were even able to get that number."

"We'll find him." He paused. "He has a friend, John Logan. We could possibly discuss the matter with him."

"No. Logan has influence in high places. All we need is to have the government making noise. But he might be in contact with Galen. Bug his office and his home."

"Logan has good security. We may not—"

"I don't want to hear about problems. I want to hear about answers." Chavez pressed the disconnect button.

He looked at the telephone number on the pad in front of him. Technology was a wonderful thing. The conquerors of old had their weapons, and Chavez had his. Dial this number, and he could talk to Galen in seconds. A phone call might be all it would take. Offer most men enough money, and they would give Chavez anything he wanted. Galen didn't have that reputation, but it was only a matter of finding which button to press.

He wouldn't dial that number. Not yet. Galen had interfered with his business. He didn't want Galen to walk away without suffering.

GALEN and Barry had been at it for almost a week, and this was the first morning Elena had felt that it wouldn't be running away for her to leave the gym.

Barry's session was over only a few minutes after she returned to the gym, and he streaked by her to go upstairs. Galen stopped her as she started after Barry. "You left. Everything okay?"

"I heard Morgan in the kitchen and went to get a cup of coffee. I need caffeine to get my day started."

"If you felt the need for outside stimulus, you must be getting better."

She nodded.

"Thank God." He grinned at her. "I'd have been truly chastened if I was wrong. Though, of course—"

"Hush." She couldn't help smiling. He was as flushed and gleaming as Barry had been, and she had the sudden urge to reach out and rumple his dark hair. Not a good idea. "Next you're going to throw a quote from your mum at me, and I'm not up to that."

"Why not? You've had your caffeine." His stride was springy as he headed to the staircase. "Well, did you bond with Judd?"

"He warned me not to let anything happen to you."

"Understandable." He stopped. "He knows what a weak, fragile being I am. But I'm curious why the subject came up."

"He said I wasn't hiding; I was waiting. Did you talk to him about Chavez?"

"I told him he was looking for you and the boy. No, I didn't tell him that you were going to find a way to rid yourself of Chavez permanently. But he may have figured it out if he's run across those workouts you put yourself through in the barn."

She stiffened. She'd tried to keep those exercise sessions private.

"It's my job to know where you are at any given time," he said, answering her unspoken question. "How is your wound?"

"Healing."

"I figured it was. I'll tell Judd not to hold you responsible if Chavez gets lucky. I knew what I was getting into."

"But you wanted to solve the problem. What is it with you? Are you so bored you have to get involved with everyone around you?"

"I'm not bored. Not this time," he said quietly. "I find you very stimulating."

She inhaled sharply. "I solve my own problems, Galen."

He nodded. "How are you with weapons? Have you lost any skills in the past six years?"

She shook her head. "I grew up with guns and knives. That's something you don't lose."

"But you do lose the edge in hand-to-hand combat. It's something I'll have to think about." He started up the steps two at a time. "Right after my shower. Turn on the oven and preheat it to four-fifty, will you? I'm making biscuits this morning."

ELENA was sound asleep in the hammock on the porch. Galen carefully closed the screen door behind him and paused a moment, gazing down at her. He hadn't seen her this vulnerable since that night at Tomaco. When she was awake, she always seemed totally alert and wary. No, that wasn't quite true. There were moments with Dominic and Barry when she looked sort of soft and sort of . . . glowing. It had been hard to keep his eyes off her.

The glow was not there now, but her cheeks were flushed from the heat, and her body was—

Better not think about her body.

He had come out here to track down Judd, who was standing at the corral fence a short distance from the porch. He moved silently down the steps. She didn't stir.

"I'm going to try to paint your damn corral. It's got some interesting contrast lines," Morgan said as Galen reached him. "But what's a corral without horses?"

"Empty?" Galen leaned on the fence. "Look at it this way. Anyone could paint a corral with horses. You'll be interpreting the loneliness, the progress of time, the cowboy myth—"

"I'm beginning to feel ill."

"Then make up your own reasons. I have a favor to ask." The flippancy dropped like a discarded shirt. "I want you to work out with Elena."

"What?" Judd glanced at Elena sleeping in the hammock. "You mean you want me to teach her some moves?"

"No. She might teach you a few. She just needs practice."

"You were in the Special Forces too. You do it."

"That's not an option. She'd know right away that I want to get my hands on her in a different way."

"Oh." Judd's brows lifted.

"So will you do it?"

"I'm not used to holding back. I could kill her."

Galen looked at Elena. "Do you have your switchblade on you?"

Judd stared at him with narrowed eyes. "In my pocket."

"Take it out, but don't spring the blade yet. Put your arm around my neck from behind."

Judd locked Galen's neck. "This is dangerous," he murmured. "I've got a lot of resentment for all those dishes."

"Now release the switchblade."

The sound was a smooth metallic click. "Why? That's not—"

Galen pushed him aside, whirled, and held up his arm to ward off the attack. Elena's hand was coming down on the back of Judd's neck. Galen grabbed her wrist. "Hold it. It's just a demonstration."

Elena started to struggle, then stopped. Her eyes were dazed.

"She was asleep." Judd was staring thoughtfully at her.

"Battle instinct. We've both seen soldiers dead to the world respond automatically." Galen released Elena. "Fast, wasn't she? That was a shuto blow. Are you still worried about hurting her?"

"Hell, no. Let her look out for herself."

"Who said I didn't?" Elena glared at Galen. "What is this?"

"You'll do it, Judd?"

He nodded slowly. "In the gym tomorrow morning?"

"Late afternoon. Barry takes his nap then," Galen said. "And not the gym. The barn."

"You've got it." Judd moved toward the house. "But I only do those damn dishes every other night."

"YOU'RE all sweaty," Barry said. "And you've got straw in your hair. Have you been playing in the barn with Judd again?"

"Yes." She kissed his forehead. "What have you been doing?"

"Galen went into town and bought a keyboard just like the piano I had at home."

"That will be fun for you."

"Can I come and watch you next time you're in the barn?"

"I don't think so."

"I let you watch me in the gym."

Barry would be frightened silly if he saw those workouts. Judd Morgan was totally ruthless, and her response was equally unrestrained. It had been a valuable eight days, and she felt almost at her old level of competence. "Sometimes grown-up games can be scary."

"But you told me I had to face scary stuff, and most of the time that made it go away. Remember when I thought there was a monster under my bed? We got down and looked."

"Maybe after a few more sessions I'll let you come." She changed the subject. "Will you play 'Yankee Doodle' after I shower?"

He shook his head. "I have to practice. I forget. . . ." He frowned. "If it's a scary game, why do you play it?"

"It only seems scary."

"Then let me come and watch."

Good heavens, he was being stubborn. Or maybe it wasn't stubbornness. "Are you worried about me, Barry?"

"You shouldn't do stuff that could hurt you."

She cupped his face in her hands. "Nothing is going to happen to me, love. There's no monster in that barn."

"You had a cut on your arm yesterday."

"It was a scratch. You get scratches all the time."

His eyes were glittering with unshed tears. "But I don't want you to get them. Ever."

She hugged him close. "I can't promise you I won't be hurt, just like you can't promise me you won't fall off that corral fence you were climbing this morning. We try to take care of ourselves, but things happen. Then we have to get up and try again. Otherwise we'd never know what it is to get to the top of the fence. Didn't it make you feel good when you did that?"

He nodded. "I could see clear to the mountains."

"I didn't stop you from climbing, did I?"

"No." A sudden smile illuminated his face. "You stood by while I climbed it. Maybe I could go along in case you need help."

"Maybe." She laughed, then gently pushed him away from her. "Now go and find Dominic. I have to shower."

He ran toward the door.

She was still smiling as she turned on the shower. He was growing more independent every day. The last few weeks had not made him timid. Fear could be a terrible thing.

But you told me I had to face scary stuff, and most of the time that made it go away.

Her smile faded. Easy words to say, not easy words to live by.

GALEN was sitting on the couch in the living room, reading, when she came into the room. He glanced up from his book. "I thought you'd gone to bed. Something wrong?"

"Yes. Can we go out on the porch?"

"Sure." He rose to his feet. "The kid okay?"

"Barry's fine." She moved toward the front door. The moon was shining, but it was better than the bright lights in here. What a coward she was.

"What do you want?" Galen said from behind her.

"You're a problem-solver." She wet her lips. "I have a problem."

"So?"

"I want you to sleep with me."

There was no sound for a full minute. "I beg your pardon?"

"You heard me."

"Turn around. I want to see something apart from the back of your head."

She took a deep breath, braced herself, and turned around. "Then look at me," she said.

His eyes were narrowed on her face.

"This is difficult. I never thought I'd— Will you do it?"

"Why?"

"I haven't been with a man willingly since Chavez took me. I've realized that's a victory for him. I won't let him scar me like that."

"Wonderful." Galen's lips tightened. "Makes a man feel really wanted."

"I can't help it. I have to be honest with you."

"Why me?"

"There's been something between us. You know it. I thought it would be easier with you."

"Not the greatest compliment I've received."

"I didn't mean to make you angry." Her voice was shaking. "Maybe this wasn't a good idea."

"Oh, don't back out now. It's just getting interesting."

"Just say yes or no." Her chin lifted. "This scares me."

The anger disappeared from his expression. "Just when I'd managed to whip up some authentic resentment for this insult to my ego"—he took a step closer—"you always manage to disarm me."

"I didn't think you'd mind." She looked away. "It wouldn't be unpleasant. I'd do anything you want. Just ask—"

"Shut up." His hand covered her lips, then moved down to her throat. "You *are* scared. Your heart is beating like crazy."

It wasn't entirely fear that was causing that response. "I told you I was. I have to do this. I taught Barry that you have to look under the bed if you think a monster is there."

"I'm not sure what that makes me." He smiled. "But there wasn't any question about our coming together from the minute I first put my hands on you. I'm just a poor male unable to quench my lust."

"Where?" She was having trouble breathing. "The hammock?"

"I'm lousy in hammocks." He grinned. He was leading her inside and up the stairs. "My bedroom. It will make me feel less insecure. You tell me I have to solve your problem and then call me a monster." He opened his bedroom door and drew her inside. "It's enough to make Casanova quake."

She stiffened as she saw the bed.

"It's going to be fine," Galen said quietly. His grasp tightened. "We'll get through it together. You've never been in a situation like this." He lifted her palm to his lips. "Or have you?"

She could feel heat spread from her palm up her inner arm. "When I was sixteen, there was a boy. I . . . enjoyed it."

He released her hand, and his fingers went to the buttons of her shirt. "No sex since Chavez?"

"The guards at the prison . . . I broke their necks."

"Good." He undid a button. "Then I won't feel obliged to go back and do it for you."

"Why should you want to do that?"

"I'm feeling amazingly protective of you." He undid another button. "I want to fight your dragons."

She inhaled sharply as his fingers brushed against the top of her breast. "You are."

"All your dragons."

"So much for my being in control."

"You're in control." He took her hand and put it on his heart. "Feel it? You did this to me. You have power. You make me feel weak and strong and everything in between."

His heart was beating hard against her palm, sending a ripple of vibration through her. "You're being very kind to me."

He dropped down on the bed, drew her beside him, leaned over her, and slowly, carefully spread her short hair on the pillow. She had never realized what an intimate gesture that could be.

7

"WE'RE getting close," Gomez said. "We've uncovered the paperwork on a house Galen owns in New Orleans. He wasn't there, but we were able to pinpoint the man who buried the paperwork. Samuel Destin, an attorney. He may have done the same on another property."

"Have you located Destin?" Chavez asked.

"He's in Antigua. He's there with his wife and little boy. We don't anticipate any trouble. We're on our way." Gomez hung up.

Yes. It was often easier to use the wife and children of a target to gain information, Chavez thought. He had done it himself.

Destin had a son.

He felt a sudden surge of anger. He also had a son, but he'd had

no opportunity to teach and guide him as Destin had. It must be the ultimate thrill to mold a human being in your own image.

His son.

SHE couldn't take her gaze off Galen's hands as he poured the coffee. Powerful hands, the fingers long and graceful and capable. She remembered how capable.

"Dessert?" Galen asked.

She looked up to see him smiling at her. He knew exactly what she was thinking. "No, thank you."

"Sure? It's apple pie. Barry cut the dough for the crust."

She smiled at her son. "Then I'll have to try it."

"I'll help." Barry jumped off the chair and ran after Galen into the kitchen. She heard them laughing and chattering.

"He likes Galen," Dominic said. "But not as much as you do."

She had been waiting for him to make a comment. He knew her too well not to realize what was going on between her and Galen.

"Don't look so apprehensive," Dominic said. "I'm not judging you. But I admit I'm worried. You really know very little about him. He's a complicated man and not the most stable."

She knew what an understatement that was. "I'm not looking for a commitment. I may never see him after we leave here."

He still looked troubled. "Forgive me. It's none of my business."

"Yes, it is." She reached over and covered his hand with her own. "We're family."

He smiled. "We are, aren't we?" He returned the pressure of her hand before releasing it. "Did I tell you Barry has a new tune he wants to play for you on the keyboard?"

GALEN hugged her close in the bed.

You really know very little about him, Dominic had said. Yet she felt as if she did. She knew his body and his wit. She had laughed with him and shared danger. But she knew what Dominic meant. Did you ever know anyone until you knew what made him what he was?

He lifted his head. "What's wrong?"

As usual, he had sensed what she was feeling. "What could be wrong?" she said.

"Tell me."

"It might be nice to know a little more about you."

"Nah, mystery men are always more sexy." He studied her. "You mean it."

"I realize I have no right to pry into your—"

"Shut up," he said roughly. "You want to know something. Pry."

"Why do you do this kind of work? You seem to have plenty of money. Why take the chances?"

"It's what I do. I tried to quit a few years ago and nearly went bananas. I have no calling. I can't paint pictures like Judd."

"You get restless."

"Did you ever consider that you might too?"

She shook her head. "I have an anchor. I have Barry."

"I envy you." He added lightly, "As my mum used to say, there's nothing better than a steadying influence."

"Did she?"

His smile faded. "No. I never knew my mother. I grew up in an orphanage. They found me in a cardboard box in an alley."

She gazed at him, shocked. "Then all those pithy little quotes are lies? Why?"

He shrugged. "It started when I was a teenager. The irony appealed to me. Putting all those homey bits of wisdom in the mouth of a woman who didn't give a damn for me. Later it just got to be a habit."

"You don't know what she was facing. Maybe she had to give you up. I almost gave up Barry."

"Did you drop a newborn in an alley when the temperature was below freezing? She obviously wanted me to die. But I fooled her. I became the healthiest, meanest little son of a bitch that ever came out of Liverpool." He sighed. "And now I'll never be able to quote my old mum to you again. It's going to put a crimp in my conversation."

"I'm glad. I don't want to hear about her." His arms enfolded her. She nestled her cheek in the hollow of his shoulder.

He stroked her hair. Then his hand moved to massage the taut muscles of her nape. "You know it's only a matter of time until Chavez appears. Why not let me go hunting and take Chavez down?"

"No!"

"Why not? It's the sensible thing to do. It will keep any fight with Chavez away from Barry." He paused. "You were planning on leading him away from Barry, weren't you? Think about it. If he takes me down, you and Barry will have a chance to—"

"I'm not going to think about it. This is my life and my fight. I'll protect Barry. I'd never risk him. I'll find a way to do both."

He was silent a moment. "I can do this, Elena. I'm very very good. Stay with Barry, and let me take care of Chavez."

"Do you think I don't want to say yes?" she asked fiercely. "It shouldn't make any difference to me who kills him. But it does."

"Why?"

"Because I— It does."

"Could it be you're beginning to care a bit for me?"

"Why would I care anything about an ass like you?"

"Well, it might be because you sense that I'm willing to throw my heart out on the ground and let you trample on it."

"Stop joking."

"Who's joking?" He brushed her temple with a kiss. "It's a surprise to me too, but I find I'm helpless around you. I feel like a kid again. But don't let it worry you. I'm a very patient bloke, and I know you have a few problems to work out."

"Don't let it worry me? How generous of you. You tell me—"

"I thought you should know. I don't know where it's going to go or how far, but I don't believe in holding things back."

"Particularly when you want to run out and get yourself killed."

"That wasn't my intention. I was merely—"

"I don't want to talk anymore." Her arms tightened around him. "And I'm tired of cuddling."

"Sex? Glad to oblige. But I have to warn you, there's going to come a time when I'm going to call it something else."

"YOUR HELICOPTER PILOT, Carmichael, is dead," Manero said.

"When did it happen?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe three weeks. He was in Rio before he disappeared. They just found the body in a village outside the city."

Three weeks. Chavez had definitely had time to get a massive search under way for Galen. "Chavez is still in Colombia?"

"Sitting like a fat cat on the top of his hill."

"There are a few people who could tell him where I might be located: John Logan, Sam Destin, and Paul Russell. I need to know where they are and if they are having any problems. Tell them about Chavez. Warn Destin and Russell they'd better go underground for a while. Logan can take care of himself."

"Why didn't you contact Destin and Russell before?"

"With enough money, even honest men can be bought. I didn't want them to have time to think about selling me out."

"I like money too."

"But you're honest in your way. Bad for you, good for me."

Manero sighed. "Give me the background info."

"You know about Logan. Paul Russell buried the paperwork on this place. Sam Destin referred him to me. Destin lives in New Orleans. Russell's home base is San Francisco, but he's in trouble with the IRS, and he floats around. You can usually reach him through his mother, Clara Russell. She works for Macy's."

"Right. I'm on it."

"Thanks, Manero." He hung up.

Damn. He had liked Carmichael. Galen warned him to get out of South America when Carmichael dropped them in Medellín. Why had he settled in Rio? Carmichael knew how powerful Chavez was.

Time was running out. It might have run out already.

"Problems?"

He turned to see Elena standing in the doorway. "Not yet." He stood up. "Come and help me make dinner. Barry's deserted me since Dominic's been teaching him that keyboard."

"You're holding something back."

"Carmichael's dead, presumably killed by Gomez." He started for

the kitchen. "But he didn't know anything important. We're still safe."

"Chavez?"

"Still in Colombia. Like this apron? Judd bought it in town." He tied on a gaudy green apron with dancing red chili peppers wearing blue tennis shoes. "He thinks I won't wear it."

"It's perfectly ridiculous."

"Yep, but I don't feel threatened. My masculinity overcomes any challenge. Besides, it makes me smile." He took out a frying pan. "I need a smile now. I liked Carmichael."

"I'm sorry. Was he a good friend?"

"No. But I'd known him for a long time."

She was silent a moment. "He's dead because of me."

"He's dead because he didn't get the hell out of Dodge. You shouldn't feel guilty."

"I do feel guilty." She stared directly into his eyes. "But it wouldn't stop me from doing it again. I can't worry about anyone but Barry. I can't let anything else matter."

"You're not talking about Carmichael. I scared you last night, didn't I? I knew I would." He got a paring knife out of the drawer. "Get those red potatoes out of the bin, will you?"

"Are you listening to me?"

"Of course I am. You're scared you may feel something for me, and you're warning me that you might have to sacrifice me on Barry's altar." He got the potatoes himself. "It doesn't matter. Barry has the edge, but give me another six months."

"Galen, I don't want—"

"You're going to say we shouldn't sleep together again. Don't be hasty. You like sex these days. You like me. I won't be discouraged, no matter how far you distance yourself, so we might as well enjoy. Right?"

"Wrong."

"Okay, I'll compromise. Just until Chavez is on the move."

"It's not fair."

"You're worried about my tender feelings?" He grinned.

She was silent for a moment and then smiled with an effort. "You really do look ridiculous in that apron."

"Just for that, you can peel the potatoes." He handed her the paring knife. "Sit over there at the table, where I can watch you."

"You don't trust me to do it right?"

"It's not that," he said quietly. "It just makes me feel good to look over and see you. It . . . warms me."

"Damn you, Galen." She gazed at him with a multitude of expressions flitting over her face before she slowly moved over and sat down in the chair. "Bring me those potatoes."

San Francisco

"MRS. Russell?"

"What is it?" Clara looked over her shoulder at the two men who'd appeared from beneath the staircase. Her hand tightened on the keys she'd gotten out to unlock the door of her apartment, her fingers moving to the pepper spray on the key chain her son had given her. Paul was always worried about her working nights in the city with all those creeps around. These men didn't look like creeps. She knew expensive suits when she saw them. They didn't look like IRS either. They were too slick. "What do you want?"

"May we come in?"

"No. Who are you?"

"Carlos Gomez." He smiled. "I need to see your son."

Maybe they *were* IRS. "I don't know where he is."

"I don't think that's true. We need to talk."

"No, we don't. Find him yourself."

Gomez took a step closer. "You're being uncooperative."

"Get out." She raised the pepper spray. "I don't want—" She gasped as Gomez ducked to one side and closed his hand on her wrist, numbing it. The key ring fell to the floor.

Gomez smiled. "Let's begin again. I need to see your son."

"WE NEED to talk, Galen." Judd Morgan was standing in the door of the library. "Got a minute?"

Galen nodded and tossed his book aside. "What's wrong?"

"It's been over a year, and Logan hasn't been able to get the agency off my back."

"He'll do it."

"But how long will I have to wait? I like your ranch, but I don't relish feeling like a prisoner. It's time I did something on my own."

"What?"

"I'm thinking." He smiled crookedly. "When I decide, you'll be the first to know. I'm not whining. I just wanted you to know I'm not your problem any longer." He turned toward the door. "Is it okay with you if I stick around here until I've made up my mind?"

Galen nodded his head.

"Good," Judd said gravely. "Because I can't wait to see you in that apron again. Did I tell you how cute you looked?"

"DESTIN, his wife, and their child are dead," Manero said. "Destin's car went off the road into the ocean in Antigua."

"When?"

"Yesterday. I have a man in San Francisco on the way to contact Clara Russell. She didn't answer her phone."

"Contact, hell. Get her out of there. Tell him to hurry." Galen hung up the phone. It might be too late already. He'd only met Clara Russell once, but he got the impression of a tough, hardworking, home-loving woman who was a little too loyal to her son for her own good. And Chavez's men would move fast.

They were getting too close to Elena. He had to sit down and run through the possible scenarios to see if he could find a solution.

"IT TOOK you a long time to break her," Chavez said.

"Seven hours," Gomez said. "She was very stubborn. Mothers usually are, aren't they?"

"Let's hope her son won't be as obstinate. I'm getting impatient."

"I'll call you back. We meet him in two hours." He hung up.

Two hours. Excitement began to course through Chavez. In a

short time he'd have the information he needed to find his son. And that bitch who had stolen him.

"CHAVEZ is on the move," Manero said. "He left Colombia in his private jet two hours ago."

"Clara Russell?" Galen said.

"My guy just found her in her apartment," Manero said. "Messy. I don't know anyone who would have withstood that kind of punishment without spilling everything they knew. What do you want me to do now?"

"I'll get back to you." Galen hung up and got to his feet. They had to move. Now.

He took the steps two at a time. "Elena!"

She looked up from the book she was reading with Barry. Galen took a step nearer and knelt by the child. "Time to have another adventure. Want to camp out in the hills?"

Barry's eyes lit up. "Really?"

"Really. Go tell Dominic. We're all going."

Elena rose to her feet as Barry ran out of the room. "How much time do we have?"

"I'm not sure. Chavez left Colombia two hours ago, but Gomez is ahead of him. Better pack quick."

She went to the closet. "I'm almost packed." She took out her duffel and reached up and got her gun from the top shelf. She tucked it into the duffel. "Now I'm completely packed."

"That's what I like. A woman who's always ready." Galen's lips tightened. "Get Barry and Dominic. I'll go tell Judd we all have to get on the road."

JUDD was shoving his cases into the bed of the pickup but looked up as Elena and Galen came out of the house. "I'm going to run my dog and the kittens over to your nearest neighbor and ask him to keep them for a while. I'll meet you at the camp."

Galen nodded absently as Judd drove away.

Elena threw Barry's keyboard into the trunk of the car. Then she

stared at the mountains. Chavez would soon be here. She'd waited for this moment for six years, and now that it was upon her, she was almost in shock. And she was feeling fear. She had thought the hatred would be violent enough to overcome any fear.

Her glance shifted to Galen's face. "Do you have explosives?"

He smiled. "You're thinking of blowing up my house with Chavez in it?"

"Yes."

"I don't have any. It's not something I keep on hand."

"Are we really camping out?"

"For a little while. I know those hills. I sent Judd up a few days ago to set up a camp where we would be safe and could still observe the ranch. I want to make sure Chavez is really here."

"So do I." She looked back at the hills. "So do I."

"THEY'RE not here?" Chavez got out of the car in front of the ranch house. "Again you've failed me, Gomez."

"They were here. There's fresh food in the refrigerator." Gomez held out a children's book. "This was in one of the bedrooms."

"But they're gone."

"We checked the barn and the entire area around the house."

"Damn you."

Gomez took a step back. "He must have been tipped off."

"You said that about the vineyard. It was because you didn't move fast enough." Chavez looked up. "Search the foothills."

"They're probably halfway to Portland by now."

"Search anyway. She was a guerrilla. She'd be comfortable in the hills."

"We'll have to wait until tomorrow morning. It's getting dark. The men I have here aren't trackers."

Chavez's hands clenched. "Daybreak. I want every man out there by first light." He turned toward the house. "I'm going to go through Galen's personal papers and see if I can come up with anything. Did you check for booby traps?"

Gomez nodded. "It's safe."

"Safety is a very fragile thing." Chavez started up the porch steps. "You might keep that in mind, Gomez."

"A TALL, muscular man, not bad-looking, gray at his temples." Galen adjusted the powerful binoculars. "Is that Chavez?"

"It sounds like him," Elena said. "Let me have the binoculars." She forced herself to look at the man standing on the porch.

Power. Strength. Cruelty.

The mat.

She hurriedly lowered the binoculars. "That's him."

"You were right. Barry did draw him here," Galen said. "I wasn't sure a selfish bastard like him would actually come after the kid."

"I was sure. He wants to play God." Her lips tightened. "Not with my Barry. When are we going to leave here?"

"Tomorrow morning." He lifted the binoculars to his eyes again. "I count eight men. They seem to be settling down at the house for the night. Come on, let's go back to camp."

At the encampment, Barry was sitting beside Judd. "Judd's teaching me to whittle, Mama. Did you see his big knife?"

She had a memory of that switchblade pressed against Galen's throat. "Yes, I've seen it."

Judd smiled. "I won't let him use it." He glanced at Galen. "See anything interesting?"

"There are a few animals out there. Nothing to worry about, but it wouldn't hurt to take turns on guard," Galen said. "I don't think we'll light a fire tonight, so I'll see what I can come up with in the way of cold rations. I'm sure I can concoct something perfectly splendid."

GALEN'S digital phone rang as they were finishing the meal.

"Where are you, Galen?" A deep voice, heavily accented.

Galen tensed. "Chavez?" Elena's gaze flew to his face.

"Yes. I'm getting impatient. I want my son. Give him to me."

Galen got up and moved beyond Barry's hearing. "You don't have a son. He belongs to Elena. It's going to stay that way."

"It won't stay that way. I was very angry at your interference, and

I wanted you punished. But I know how to cut my losses. I'm willing to pay to have my son turned over to me. Five million dollars. You set up the terms of the drop-off."

"No way."

"Ten million."

"We're not trading, Chavez."

"I'll go higher."

"And you'll get the same answer."

"The bitch isn't that good a lay."

"I'm terminating this conversation."

"Think about it. I'll give you my phone number."

Smother the anger. They might be able to use it. Galen took out his pen and pad. "What is it?"

Chavez rattled off a number. "I'll get him anyway. If you hand him over, you become a very rich man." He hung up.

"What did he want?" Galen turned to see Elena and Judd standing behind him.

"What he's wanted all along. Only he offered to pay for him. The last offer was ten million."

Judd gave a low whistle. "That's impressive money."

"You took his phone number down," Elena said to Galen.

"Oh, for God's sake, I thought we might need it. Did you think I was hedging my bets?"

"No." She looked away. "I don't know what to think."

But she had doubted him for that moment. What else could he expect? From the moment she had learned Chavez was on his way, she had changed, gone back into the battle mode she had learned from childhood—wary, tense, trusting no one.

It hurt, dammit. "No, I'm not going to take the damn money."

Judd glanced from one to the other and changed the subject. "Who takes first watch?"

"I do," Galen said curtly. "I need some space."

ELENA could see only one guard circling the house.

She crawled slowly, silently, grasping the rifle with her left hand.

There wasn't much brush in this level meadowland, and she had to keep low and move with painstaking care.

The lights in the office were burning. Chavez was probably trying to find a way to trace them. Once she reached the barn, it would shelter her until she had a look around. She would have to take out the first guard, and she'd already spotted another man at the corral. If she took him out too, then she might be able to get to the house.

Her gaze was fixed on the window of the study as she crawled forward. I'm coming, Chavez. Do you feel it? She could imagine him in her sights, sitting at the desk shuffling papers. No. Don't think about it. Just do it.

A heavy weight dropped on her.

She struggled over onto her back, reaching for her rifle.

"No," Galen whispered, pinning her down.

She froze. "What are you doing?"

"I'm trying to stop you from getting yourself killed. You can't take down Chavez when he's being guarded by fifteen men."

"There are only eight men."

"That's what I thought. The others must have arrived after dark. They're all over the place, and they're pretty good. I almost got caught when I was scouting the area."

"Scouting? When?"

"When I was supposed to be on watch. Do you suppose you're the only one who hoped we could end this thing with one bullet? It's no good, Elena. I was going to tell you the chances were nil, but when I came back to camp, you'd already left."

"Let me go."

"Not until you tell me you'll go back to camp."

"The only thing I'll tell you is that if you don't get off me, I'm going to break your ribs and crush your manhood."

"Oh"—he studied her face for a moment—"what a persuasive woman you are." He then released her. "Now what?"

"We go back to camp. I'm not stupid." She turned and started crawling across the meadow. "But don't you ever strong-arm me again, Galen."

It was several hundred yards before they came to the first straggly trees that signaled the start of the foothills. Galen pulled her to her feet. "Where did you get that rifle?"

"I took it from Judd's truck. I wasn't sure I could get close enough to use my thirty-eight."

"My property, please," Judd said as he stepped out of the trees. He held out his hand to Elena.

She handed him the rifle. "Sorry. I needed it."

"You could have asked."

"I didn't think you would lend it to me."

"Makes sense. But don't do it again, or you'll regret it. I don't give second warnings." He turned and strode ahead of them in the direction of their camp.

"It didn't do me any good anyway." She shrugged. "We might as well head out. I want to get Barry somewhere safe."

"He won't be safe anywhere now, Elena."

She knew that was true. Now that Chavez was here in the United States, it would be only a matter of time until he found them. "Safer. Do you have any suggestions?"

"He's probably been tipped off about my place in New Orleans. I have an idea of a place that might work for us."

"Where are we going?"

"You're going to leave it up to me? Amazing." His tone was sarcastic. "You seem to want to do everything else on your own."

She whirled on him. "I did what I had to do."

"And you did it alone," he said through his teeth. "You couldn't ask for help. You couldn't ask me to go with you. What have I got to do to get through to you? You are *not* alone. Do you hear me? Let me help. *Trust* me, Elena."

"I trust you."

He shook his head. "Not enough." He drew a deep breath and tried to temper his tone. "We'll let everyone sleep for another hour or two while I make a few phone calls."

"You didn't tell me where we're going."

He turned away. "Atlanta."

8

Atlanta

THE cottage on the lake was rustic but spacious, and the surroundings were absolutely beautiful, Elena thought. The hills and woods and the lake itself were spectacular.

"Hey, come back here."

She turned to see Judd running after Barry as he streaked toward the lake. "Barry!"

"I've got him." Judd scooped Barry up and tucked the giggling child under his arm. "Come on, brat. If you're so set on jumping in the lake, I'll see if I can find something you can wear for a swimsuit. Does he swim, Elena?"

"Like a fish," Dominic said. "I taught him in the creek a short distance from our house."

"Then you'd better come along and keep him in line," Judd said as he set Barry down and started unloading the car.

Judd seemed to be doing a good job, Elena thought. He'd kept Barry cheerful and busy on the long cross-country flight that brought them here.

He looked up and caught her gaze. "I like kids," Judd said quietly, as if he had read her mind. He took a duffel and grabbed Barry's hand. "Come on, let's get you unpacked."

Galen picked up two suitcases and closed the trunk. "Elena, I'm sure you can't wait to scout around and make sure it's safe, but be back by dinner." He turned toward the house. "I've contacted David Hughes, who provided the security people I've used before in Atlanta; they'll show up tomorrow morning for you to vet. I wouldn't want you to take one of them down by mistake. We need some good men to patrol the woods." He carried the cases up to the porch, unlocked the door, and went inside with Judd and Barry.

"I'm going to go swimming with Judd and Barry," Dominic said from behind Elena. "Why don't you come with us?"

She turned to face him. "I'm going to scout the area. I want to be familiar with every cove and tree."

"Chavez is on the other side of the country. It will take him a little while to regroup and send out his search dogs. We probably have some breathing space. Take a little time off and relax."

It had taken them only five hours to get to here. If Chavez found out where they were, he'd be on them like a vulture. "I can't."

"No, I can see you can't," he said sadly. "It's too bad."

"THEY'RE not in the hills," Gomez said. "But the man I sent out to scout out the area reports that there's a small airport about eighty miles from here. He's questioning the personnel there now."

"If Galen reached an airport, then we've lost him. He's not going to let himself be traced." Chavez glanced with frustration at the pile of papers on the desk. No leads. Nothing.

He took out his phone and started to dial.

"MAMA, look at me, I'm going to dive into the water!"

"I'm watching."

Barry jumped onto the tire Judd had tied to a branch of an oak tree close to the lake. Then Judd pulled the tire back and let it go. The tire swung out over the lake, and a whooping Barry jumped into the water. He surfaced, sputtering. "Did you see me?"

"I would have had to be blind not to see you. And deaf too."

"I'm going to do it again."

He swam to the edge of the lake, and Dominic helped him onto the bank. "Watch me," Barry said.

"Only a couple more times. It will be dark soon."

But it wasn't dark yet, and the setting sun gilded the water with beauty. In spite of her tension, Elena had not been able to ignore the sheer blessed tranquillity of the last three days.

"Pretty." Galen dropped down beside her on the porch swing. "I like porch swings."

"You have a hammock on your porch at the ranch."

"Hammocks are for dozing. Porch swings are for socializing. I can imagine the two of us sitting here for the next fifty years or so."

"I can't."

"Because you're too tied up in knots to imagine anything." He reached out and took her hand. "Don't stiffen up. I'm not trying to lure you back into my bed. However, I have to point out that sex is known to be a great relaxer."

"But I can't risk it. I can't concentrate on anything but Chavez now." Her gaze shifted back to Barry in the water.

Galen kissed her wrist and then placed her hand back on her lap. "What a dilemma for a sex-starved man."

His phone rang.

She tensed.

"Easy." He punched the answer button. "Galen."

Elena could feel his muscles tighten. "No way. Talk to me."

"Who is it?" she asked.

"Chavez."

She went cold. "He wants to talk to me?"

He nodded. "But we're not going to give him what he wants. You don't have to talk. I can deal with him."

"Give me the phone."

He hesitated, then handed it to her. "I'm here, Chavez."

"I need to know where *here* is, Elena. You've been leading me on a chase."

He sounded so close, as if he was only yards away. He's not close, she told herself. He can't hurt me. He can't hurt Barry or Galen. "Go home, Chavez. You're not going to find us."

"Your voice is shaking, Elena. You're afraid, aren't you?"

"I'm not afraid of you."

"You're lying. I always knew when you were afraid. It always made the contests more interesting. Because you were fighting yourself as well as me. But in the end, I beat you."

"You didn't beat me. I pretended, you son of a bitch. And you were so conceited, you were fooled."

A silence. "That's not the truth."

"Yes, it is. You lost, Chavez."

She could feel his anger vibrating through the phone. "If you're telling the truth, then we have unfinished business. I'm almost as eager to get my hands on you as I am to find my son. You remember what it felt like to have my hands on you?"

The ropes cutting into her wrists, his hands running over her body. Don't think about it. "I've forgotten. You'll never get Barry."

"I'm going to give him my name. Little Rico. After all, he's my child. I'll be the one who tells him what to do."

"Why did you want to talk to me? You don't actually think I'm going to tell you anything."

"I wanted to hear your voice. It brings back such pleasant memories." He paused. "And I have someone here who wants to hear your voice too. I'm giving the phone to him now."

"Elena?"

She closed her eyes. "Luis."

"You've got to do what he says. He says he'll kill me."

"Why should I care? You betrayed me, Luis."

"I couldn't help it. I was hurting. I needed a hit. Dominic shouldn't have told me. He kept it from me all these years. He shouldn't have told me about Barry. I didn't want to tell Chavez."

"But you did it. You didn't care about me or Dominic or Barry. All you cared about were those damn drugs." She blinked back tears. "Well, I can't care what happens to you now. I have to worry about the people you served up to Chavez."

"You do care." His voice was desperate. "Remember when we were children? All the good times . . . Help me, Elena."

"By giving up my son? You've got to be crazy."

"I couldn't help what I did. You were always the strong one. I can't stand pain, Elena. They'll hurt me. You have to—"

Chavez took the phone. "What a hard woman you are."

"You might as well let him go." She tried to steady her voice. "What made you think I'd give up Barry for a man who betrayed me? Do you think I have any feeling left for him?"

"Then you won't mind if I toy with him. He's a weakling. I'll have him call you back after I see just how weak he is." He hung up.

She thrust the phone at Galen. "He had my brother talk to me."

"So I heard."

"He's going to hurt him." She tried to keep her lips from trembling. "I don't care. I tried to get him off drugs. It's not my fault." Tears were running down her cheeks. "I can't help him, Galen."

"I know." He pulled her into his arms. "Shh, I know."

"What's wrong?" Dominic was frowning as he climbed the porch steps. "What's happened, Elena?"

"Luis . . ." She pushed Galen away and wiped her eyes on the back of her hands. "Chavez has Luis with him, Dominic."

He stopped in shock. "Luis."

"He's going to hurt him."

It took Dominic a moment to recover. "Sometimes I forget how evil Chavez is. There has to be something you can do."

"He's using Luis to bait a trap. He wants Elena as well as Barry," Galen said. "If she tries to go after Luis, he'll snap the trap. Besides, we don't even know where he is."

"Could he still be at the ranch?"

"I called the DEA as soon as we got to the airport and told them where Chavez could be located. He'd left the ranch by the time they got there."

"You didn't tell me that," Elena said.

"Why should I give you bad news?"

"Is Chavez going to call back?" Dominic asked.

"Yes." Elena rose to her feet. "I'm going down to the lake." She wanted to be close to Barry, to touch him.

She hurried down the steps and down the path.

"YOU'RE going to go after him?" Judd shook his head. "Let Chavez put him down. The sniveling bastard deserves it."

"You're probably right. In any event, I'm going to scout around to make sure Luis is really in dire straits before I decide whether or not to go in."

"Go in where? You know where Chavez is?"

"Miami. He went there directly from the ranch. He's cruising the coast on a yacht called *The Prize*."

Judd's gaze narrowed. "And how do you know that?"

"I called Manero the minute I heard Chavez was on his way to the ranch. I told him to get a man out there to track Chavez when he left. He came through for me."

"And you didn't tell Elena. She won't be pleased."

"I don't care. I want her safe." Galen's lips twisted. "Is that too much to ask? She's never been safe in her life."

"You want me to go with you?"

"I may need help."

"It will be difficult. A yacht isn't like a house. They can see you coming."

"It can be done."

"When?"

"Tomorrow night."

Judd was silent a moment. "I'll think about it."

THE mat.

Elena woke up screaming.

Just a dream. She was panting and drenched in sweat.

She got out of bed and went to the bathroom and splashed water on her face, then changed her nightshirt. A moment later she was on the porch, taking deep, cool breaths.

"Couldn't sleep?"

She looked over her shoulder to see Galen standing in the doorway. "Oh, I slept," she said. "Nightmares."

"About Luis?"

"Yes. He was on the mat, and Chavez was hitting him and hitting him and hitting him." She drew a deep breath. "Galen, I can't just sit here while Chavez is torturing him."

"What about Barry?"

"You and Dominic will keep him safe."

"Oh, so I'm supposed to baby-sit?"

"Yes. Luis isn't your responsibility. I want only one thing from you. I need to know where Chavez is."

"And you think I can find out?"

"Sure." She tried to smile. "You're the great problem-solver. Please. Find him. I don't want to have nightmares like that for the rest of my life."

CHAVEZ'S call came the next morning.

"Did you have a good night?" he asked after Galen gave her the phone. "I'm afraid poor Luis didn't. I don't know how much more he can take. . . . Give me the boy."

"We've discussed this." Her voice was shaking. "No deal."

"You're upset. I think you're weakening." He paused. "And you'll be even more inclined to save him if you see what kind of punishment you're inflicting on him. Yes, I believe we should arrange to bring you and Luis together. Let me see. Suppose I take your brother to Orlando two days from now. The garden of the Kissimmee Hotel. The bench beside the koi pond. Ten a.m."

"Do you think I'm an idiot?"

"Oh, he'll be alone. I understand Galen called the DEA on me when I was at the ranch. Do you think I don't know that he could have a truckload of agents at the hotel to try to catch me? It wouldn't be smart to place myself in that position."

"Then what's to stop me from taking Luis?"

"The fact that I'll have a very fine marksman stationed nearby. Luis leaves the garden, he's dead."

"And that same shooter could take me out."

"That's your problem. I'm sure you can work it out."

"I won't be there."

"I think you will." He hung up.

"He's bringing Luis to the Kissimmee Hotel in Orlando two days from now," she said. "He thinks I'm softening. He wants to show me his handiwork. He says Luis will be alone."

"Not likely."

She nodded. "Trap."

"But there may be an opportunity there," Dominic said. "Perhaps we can snatch Luis before they can close it."

"He wants Elena," Galen said. "And I don't want that trap closing on her."

"He wouldn't show up himself or in force," Elena said. "He knows that you called the DEA on him before. He said there would be a gunman with his sights on Luis."

"The shooter will try to take you out, or there will be another wild card in the deck."

"I know that. But I may never have a better chance."

Galen threw up his hands. "And clear the way?"

"He's her brother," Dominic said. "He's weak, not bad, and he deserves better than to be treated this way by Chavez."

"Oh, for God's sake," said Galen. "Why am I wasting my breath? You're going to do it, aren't you?"

"I've got to try," she whispered.

"It's a big risk."

"Then I'll have to find a way to make it less."

He stared at her in exasperation and then turned away. "Okay, we go in. I'll call Manero and have him scope out the hotel."

"No," she said. "I go in alone. Dominic will help me. I need—"

Galen shook his head. "I'm going in with you. Dominic will take care of Barry. If you like, we can bring Barry with us as far as an airport outside Orlando and leave him and Dominic on the helicopter while we go into town. At the first sign of danger Dominic can split with the kid."

She didn't like the idea of bringing Barry with them, but leaving him hundreds of miles away was unacceptable. "Okay, I suppose that would be safe enough."

"Safer than we'll be." Galen turned and left the room.

She couldn't blame him for being exasperated. The situation could come unraveled in a heartbeat.

"It's the right thing to do, Elena," Dominic said.

She met his gaze. "I said I'd try, Dominic. But if I find that I'm endangering my son or there's a strong possibility he may lose his

mother over this, I'll back out. Barry is innocent, and that weighs the scale in his favor."

WOULD she come?

Chavez stared out over the rail at the skyscrapers of Miami Beach. It was a long shot, but he didn't have many options at this point.

"We go to Orlando?" Gomez asked behind him.

Chavez nodded. The setup might not yield his son, but it could rid the boy of his most ardent protector. Galen might be more willing to deal with her out of the picture. "How is Luis?"

"Out."

"Wake him up." He paused. "I want the bruises to be very visible, Gomez. I want her sweet, gentle heart to bleed for him."

"MANERO faxed me a diagram." Galen spread the sheet on the kitchen table. "Here's the bridge over the koi pond. The hotel is six stories, but the garden can only be viewed from about a third of the windows on the south side of the building." He drew a circle around the windows facing the garden. "So this is sniper country."

"Maybe." Judd tapped the hotel across the street. "How much of the garden can be seen from here?"

"That's the Mirado Hotel. Their angle is skewed. Only four rooms have a view." Galen circled those rooms. "There aren't any other nearby buildings with access. Of course, that doesn't mean anyone leaving couldn't be picked off by a car driving by."

"Then you take care of it," Judd said. "You're good at extractions. Extract us." He pointed at the windows of the Kissimmee Hotel. "I'll clear the ground here and scout out the hotel across the street. Who meets with Luis?"

"I do," Elena said. "And we need a car waiting outside that garden gate. I'm not going to waste time talking to Luis."

"You don't even know if he'll be able to walk," Galen said.

"I'll get him out. Just have the car waiting."

Galen nodded. "I'll do a sweep through the garden before you go in, just to make sure there aren't any surprises."

"No. You have your job." She turned away. "I'll check it out."

"Suit yourself." Galen turned to Judd. "How much time do you need?"

"I'll go in tonight and scout around. Chavez may stage a last-minute arrival for his shooter at the Kissimmee Hotel, so I'll position myself across the street at the Mirado and keep watch while Elena meets with Luis."

"Good idea."

"Just don't forget me when you pull everyone out." He smiled sardonically. "It would seriously offend me."

"Then don't waste time when you see Elena and Luis heading for the gate. Be out front waiting." Galen moved toward the door. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll see what I can do to pull a rabbit out of a hat to get us out of Orlando with our skins intact. That's Disney World territory. Maybe I'll put Donald Duck into the mix."

"Good luck," Judd murmured ironically.

As Galen left, Elena stared Judd in the eye. "Well? Aren't you going to say anything to me? Isn't this what you warned me not to do? I'm putting Galen's life on the line."

He shook his head. "He's doing that himself. You couldn't stop him if you wanted to."

"I do want to stop him."

"Then back out, Elena. This is a lose-lose proposition. What are we going to do with your brother if we get him away from Chavez?"

She didn't know. It was a complication she didn't need, but that didn't matter. "I have to do this, Judd."

"Then I'll see you in Orlando."

She followed him out onto the front porch and watched as he got into the Jeep.

"Stop fretting, Elena."

She turned to see Dominic coming up the path from the lake. "Where have you been?" she asked.

"Just sitting and thinking. Nothing like looking at God's wonders to soothe the soul. You should try it." He dropped down on the porch steps. "Your soul needs some soothing."

She sat down beside him. "Yes."

"You always were a worrier, even as a little girl. Luis lived for the moment. He made you remember that you were still a child."

"Is that who you were thinking about down by the lake?"

"How could I think of anyone else? Are we going to be able to save him?"

"I hope so. Galen and Judd are smart and experienced. They'll make a difference."

"I pray everything will go well."

She leaned her head against his arm. How many times had they sat like this on the front steps at Tomaco? Comfort flowed through her in a blessedly familiar stream. "Then I know it will. You have friends in high places."

He chuckled. "Let's hope they see things my way."

9

"LOOK way down there," Josie McFee, the pilot, shouted over the sound of the helicopter rotors to Barry in the seat behind her. "That's Disney World. Home of Mickey Mouse."

Barry eagerly pressed his face to the window. "I see a castle and a—" He turned to Elena. "Is that where we're going?"

"Not this trip. We have business here, and we thought you might enjoy the helicopter ride." Elena glanced at Galen in the copilot's seat. "How far?"

"Another five minutes," Josie McFee answered for him. She smiled at Barry. "I hear you're going to wait with me in the copter. Maybe we could do a little sightseeing."

"Mama?"

Elena shook her head. "We need Josie to wait for us."

"Ten minutes, and we'll be back at the airport," Josie said. "You can't even drive to Kissimmee in that time."

"It's not a bad idea," Dominic said.

She supposed it would be all right for them to leave the airport for such a short time. It would keep Barry from becoming fidgety.

"Trust me," Josie said. "I'll give him a bang-up tour."

She did trust the woman. It was strange that she would feel so at ease with a woman she had just met, but Josie McFee inspired confidence. She was a woman in her fifties, with graying hair, a plump build, and an animated manner. "I'm sure you will. Just don't drop down too close to that castle."

"No danger," Galen said. "This entire city is controlled by Disney, including the airspace."

Josie banked the helicopter. "We're going down."

The helicopter settled on the tarmac. "There's the car. I'll check it out." Galen jumped out of the aircraft and ducked beneath the whirring rotors to run toward the hangar.

"Want to sit up front with Josie?" Dominic asked Barry. "You can see better."

Barry's face lit up. "Could I?"

"Sure," Josie said. "Come ahead."

Dominic was already out of the copter and lifting Barry into the copilot's seat. "There." He fastened the seat belt. "Now pay attention to everything Josie does, and you'll learn how to fly this bug."

Barry's gaze was eagerly wandering over the controls. "Wow. It looks like a spaceship."

"Not quite." Dominic caressingly touched Barry's hair and then stepped back. "I think I dropped a slip of paper when I got out. Will you see if it's on the floor, Elena?"

He was right; there was a square piece of paper on the floor. She bent to retrieve it.

"Have a good trip." He slammed the door and waved at Josie.

Elena stared at him in disbelief. "Dominic!" The helicopter was lifting, turning, and leaving Dominic standing below.

"Land, dammit."

"I can't hear you," Josie shouted over her shoulder. "And I don't think you want my copilot to hear. You have a note to read."

Elena took one final, enraged glance at Dominic walking toward the car where Galen waited. She unfolded the note.

Elena,

My job, I think. It's not only because you and Luis and Barry would never have been put into this position if I hadn't trusted Luis. I've always believed he could be saved if I just went that extra mile for him.

This is the extra mile.

I'm no hero. Galen has promised to check out the garden. I'll only take Luis to the car. Don't blame anyone but me for this. I convinced Galen, and Galen convinced the pilot.

Now I have to convince you that even if you force Josie to land, the action will be over by the time you find a way to get to the hotel. In addition, you'll have to leave Barry unprotected and probably frighten him witless. Convinced?

You have to let someone else shoulder this burden. Your job is to take care of our boy.

All my love,
Dominic

AS HE opened the door, Judd stared quizzically at the police uniform Galen was wearing. "You'll pardon me for telling you that uniform doesn't suit you. It requires a certain air to carry it off."

"People seldom question police officers." Galen entered the room and dumped a large box on the bed before striding over to the window. "You checked out the rooms in this hotel?"

"I'm not even going to bother to answer that question." Judd followed Galen to the window. "The sniper was in the third room to the right, fifth floor of the Kissimmee across the street. Pat Reilly, former IRA, pretty good."

"Not good enough?"

"All passion, no intellect. I left a 'Do Not Disturb' sign on the door of his room." He gestured to another room, on the sixth floor. "That one has me a little worried. I checked it two hours ago, but

the drapes are drawn now. It's not impossible that someone could pick the lock and take up residence."

"A second shooter."

"We'll see. No time to go over there now. I'll have to handle it from here." He handed Galen his binoculars. "Two men just delivered Luis Kyler. He's not a pretty sight."

Galen focused the binoculars. Luis Kyler might once have been a handsome young man, but he was now so thin that his neat gray suit hung on him. His face was bruised and swollen, and he was sitting on the edge of the bench beside the koi pond as if too hurt to lean back. "He can walk?"

Judd nodded. "He was getting some support, but he's mobile. His guards left out the back gate."

"I'll do a walk-through. Then I'll let Dominic go after Luis." He handed Judd the binoculars. "It should be over in fifteen minutes."

"If we're lucky." Judd picked up his rifle from the bed and went back to the window. "And if you don't foul up getting us out of here. I'd bet that street out there is crawling with Chavez's men."

Galen opened the door. "No bet."

"What's in that box on the bed?"

"Your disguise."

Judd crossed back to the bed, opened the box, and started to laugh. "You've got to be kidding."

DEAR God, the boy looked terrible, Dominic thought as he drew close to the bench. "Luis."

Luis's eyes widened. "What are you doing here?"

"I've come to take you away."

Luis struggled to his feet. "You're not supposed to be here." His voice was shrill. "Elena is. It has to be Elena."

"We're going to get you away from here. You'll see Elena soon." Dominic stepped closer. "Come with me, Luis."

"Go away, Dominic. Tell Elena to come." Luis's eyes were glittering feverishly. "It has to be Elena."

"You're hurt. Listen carefully. You have to come with me."

"I can't go. I have to do what they say. They won't give me anything unless I do what they say." His voice was shaking. "They haven't given me anything in two days. I have to have it."

"Coke?"

"Heroin."

Dominic felt sick. "We'll get you off it." He took Luis's arm.

Luis pulled away. "That's what I'm afraid of. Send Elena."

"Why?"

He pulled a pistol from his jacket pocket. "I have to shoot Elena."

Dominic stiffened. "You don't mean that."

"They said they'd give me my injection if I did it. I have to."

"She's your sister. She loves you."

Luis looked at him in wonder. "Why should it matter?"

Dominic was filled with horror. "Give me the gun, Luis."

"You always interfered. You should have made her come."

He reached for the gun. "Don't let Chavez do this."

"You should have made her come. You've ruined everything."

Luis's finger pressed the trigger. Pain ripped through Dominic's chest. He stared at Luis in disbelief.

"Don't look at me like that. It's your fault." Luis pressed the trigger again and again. "You should have made her come. . . ."

THREE shots.

Galen jumped out of the truck and ran into the garden. Another shot. Dominic was on the ground, and Luis was standing over him. One more shot, and Luis crumpled to the ground.

Where had it come from? No time to check. Galen fell to his knees beside Dominic. "Come on. Let me help you up. We've got to—"

Dammit to hell.

JUDD waddled slowly out of the hotel. The street was humming with activity. Four police cars were parked outside, and guests were streaming out and being ushered down the block.

Galen was standing beside a white truck at the curb. Emblazoned in green letters on the side was ORLANDO BOMB DISPOSAL.

"Get in." Galen opened the back door of the truck. "We have to get out of here before the real bomb squad arrives."

"I'm going to get you for this." Judd scowled through his protective visor. "I look like someone from outer space."

"Someone had to be the bomb tech."

Judd threw his gun case in the truck. "You called in a bomb threat?"

"It was the only thing I could think of. I thought the truck would protect Luis and Dominic." Galen helped Judd into the back of the truck. "You can get rid of the suit as soon as we get out of town."

"I hope so. It's hot as hell."

"Was there another gunman?"

"Yes. The window on the sixth floor. I took care of it." He paused. "Is Dominic dead?"

"Yes, he's dead." Galen slammed the truck door.

GALEN parked the truck beside the hangar and stared blindly at the helicopter. He heard the truck door open behind him and Judd get out. A moment later Judd was standing beside the driver's window. "You stay here. I'll send her to you."

Elena came walking slowly, warily. She knew something was wrong. She stopped and looked at him.

He reached over and opened the truck door for her. "Get in. You won't want Barry to see you."

SHE couldn't cry. She mustn't cry. If she did, she might never stop. "Both of them?" she asked dully. "Luis and Dominic?"

"It all went bad. There was a second shooter."

"But you expected there might be. I should have been there. You shouldn't have let Dominic go. I would have been more cautious. I might have been able to turn it around."

"You're right. I made a mistake."

"Stop being so noble." Judd was again standing outside the window. "I'm glad I decided to come back. Tell her the truth."

"The truth?" Elena repeated.

"Chavez threw in a monkey wrench neither you nor Dominic expected. He gave Luis a gun and evidently ordered him to take you out. Luis killed Dominic instead."

"Luis . . . Luis couldn't have done it."

"I was watching the entire time," Judd said. "He did it."

"And then the shooter took out Luis?" Her lips twisted with pain.

"Blast you, she didn't have to know," Galen told Judd.

"No, but I always opt for clarity. It was better that she realized it wasn't something you could have anticipated. Oh, and I've told Barry that Dominic had to stay over on business." Judd turned and walked back toward the helicopter.

IT WAS dark when they arrived back at the cottage. "I'll put the kid to bed." Judd picked up Barry and took him in.

It was kind of him, Elena thought wearily. He had kept Barry occupied and oblivious to anyone but himself during the trip from Orlando. What a strange man. Strange and violent, and yet somewhere in him there must be a soft streak. "I'm glad he kept Barry busy. I don't know what to say to him."

"Don't say anything until it's the right time." Galen helped her out of the car. "You'll know when it feels right."

"Will I?" She wasn't sure of anything. "I don't want Barry to hurt like this. He's so little. He doesn't understand."

Galen led her toward the cottage. "I'll call Logan and ask him to take care of arrangements for Dominic and your brother. The authorities probably won't release the bodies for a while."

"I know. It doesn't matter. I guess we should give Dominic a Catholic burial, but I don't think he'd care what happened to his body. He knew his soul wouldn't be there anymore." She paused. "Luis? I can't think of him right now. Dominic would forgive him. But I don't believe I can."

"Nor can I." He opened the front door. "Let's get you to bed."

She was too numb to argue as he led her to her room and helped her out of her clothes and into bed. He got a washcloth and wiped her face and hands, then sat in a chair beside her.

She shook her head. "There's nothing to talk about. It's done. They're dead." She looked away from him. "Please. Go away. I'm going to cry. . . . Please. I can't keep it back. I want to remember Dominic and do my grieving for him. It's a private thing."

He stood up and gazed down at her. He then leaned forward and kissed her forehead. "I'll look in on you later." The tears were already running down her cheeks as he left the room.

GALEN found Judd on the porch. "The boy asleep?"

"Out like a light. How is she doing?"

"Hurting, of course. She lost her brother and her best friend."

Judd nodded.

"After you jumped in the bomb truck, you asked whether Dominic was dead. Why didn't you ask about Luis?"

Judd smiled.

Galen gazed out at the lake. "I would have thought you'd get that sniper before he shot Luis. You must not be as good as I thought you were." He paused. "On the other hand, what if you did get that sniper, then swung the rifle back and took out Luis yourself?"

"Now, why would I do that?"

"You tell me."

Judd tilted his head. "Hmm. You want me to play your little game? Okay. Why would I want to take out Luis? Let's see. He was a drug addict who had betrayed Elena. He would be a weak link and would constantly endanger us. He would probably be a torment to her for the rest of her life. We would never be able to trust him." He smiled. "Not that I'm admitting anything, you understand. Oh, one more reason. I *liked* Dominic Sanders, and anyone who killed him didn't deserve to live."

BARRY'S expression was serious as he drew back the arrow of his bow. "Attaboy," Judd murmured. "Now focus on the target."

Elena stopped on the porch and watched the two of them aiming at a target pinned to the pine tree. Barry let loose the arrow and then whooped. "I hit it this time!"

"Yes, you did." Judd gave him another arrow. "Now let's see if you can get closer to the bull's-eye."

"Your son's got a good eye," Galen said behind her.

"Where did he get the bow and arrow? I had to leave his in Tomaco."

"Judd made it for him. They've been bonding big time for the last few days."

"I can see that. I've not been much use to Barry lately."

"You deserved some healing time."

"Has Barry said anything about Dominic?"

"Not yet. Children accept changes better than adults."

"He loved Dominic. He'll ask about him."

DAWN was pearling the sky. Elena stood at the window of her bedroom and looked out at the lake. She knew it was no use going back to bed. When she slept, she dreamed of Dominic—and Luis.

She turned away from the window. She wouldn't think about it. She would go and sit by Barry's bed and watch him sleep. She would let all the wonder of him flow over her, and she would be calmer. She slipped on her robe and moved silently from the room to the one across the hall. She opened the door and stood in the doorway. Barry was huddled beneath his blankets. She sat down in the rocking chair beside the bed. Children slept so deeply. . . .

She stiffened. She should be able to hear him breathing. She leaned forward and pulled back the cover. No Barry. Pillows.

"No!" She turned and ran toward the door. "Barry!"

"What's wrong?" Galen met her in the hall. "Is he sick?"

"He's not there. He's gone. I've got to find him."

"He's not in his room?"

"I told you he wasn't. Chavez has taken him."

"What if he just went down to the lake?"

"He knows he's not to go near the water alone."

"Kids aren't always predictable. And why wouldn't Chavez come in and kill the rest of us if he'd found out where we are?" Galen went past her into Barry's room and flipped on the light.

"The window is still locked." He crossed to the bed and picked up a sheet of paper on the nightstand. "Damn."

"What is it?" She ran over to him. "What does it say?"

He handed it to her.

> Sorry, Galen. I have to have the money. It's the key to unlock the box I'm in. I'll call you.
>
> Judd

The note dropped from her hand. "I'm going to kill him."

"Stand in line." Galen moved toward the door. "I'll see if Hughes or any of his guards saw them leave. If I get any leads, I'll come back for you, Elena."

"The hell you will. I'm coming with you."

NONE of the guards had seen any sign of Judd or Barry.

"I'm going to kill him," she repeated as they walked back to the cottage. "And if he hurts Barry, I'm going to crucify him."

"I don't think he'll hurt him."

"But you don't know. The bastard is an assassin."

"You saw something in him that made you trust him before this."

"And he betrayed me. Just like Luis betrayed me." She turned on him. "And you brought him into our lives."

"That's true," he said quietly.

"You should never have—" She swallowed. "Why am I blaming you? I should have seen through him."

"I'd rather you blamed me than yourself." He started up the porch steps. "Come on, let's get some coffee."

She stared at him, incredulous. "Sit around and drink coffee?"

"No. Sit around and wait for Judd to call."

"HE'LL call. He said he'd call."

"Well, he hasn't," Elena said. "And it's almost dark."

"He'll probably try to dig in and get settled first. It only seems like a long time to us."

"It seems like forever." Her hand was shaking as she lifted it

to rub her temple. "What if Barry's scared? What if he's hurt?"

"It wouldn't be to Judd's advantage to hurt Barry. He's a commodity now."

"He's a human being, a little boy." She swallowed to ease the tightness of her throat. "And he's alone with that killer."

The house phone rang. She hurried across the room and picked up the receiver. "Hello."

"Hello, Elena," Judd said.

"You bastard. Where's my son?"

"He's safe."

Galen disappeared, and she heard him pick up the extension in the living room. "What the hell are you doing, Judd?" he asked.

"Surviving. I told you that I was going to have to take my fate into my own hands. Logan's taking too long. I could be dead before he's able to get the heat off me."

"And surviving is kidnapping Barry?"

"Surviving is getting millions of dollars from Chavez to bribe all the people I need to bribe to make them forget I ever existed."

"Sweet. And trading a kid for the money is really great."

"Beggars can't be choosers. I never claimed to be an angel."

"I want my son back," Elena said. "If I don't get him, I'll track you down and slit your throat."

"Always the gentle lady," Judd said. "I didn't call to make excuses. I wanted you to know that Barry has nothing to fear. I like the kid. He's not scared, and he's having a fairly good time."

"You're lying."

"He thinks he's on an adventure and you know about it. I talked him into coming with me. He didn't think it that odd, considering you'd made a lot of hasty exits lately. I told him we were pretending to be Indians."

"Bring him back, Judd," Galen said.

"Look at it my way. I'm on borrowed time. If I don't do this, they'll catch up with me and kill me. If I do it, the kid will be upset, but he won't die. You may even have a chance to get him away from Chavez after I pick up my money."

"It will make it a thousand times harder," Galen said.

"You always liked a challenge," Judd said. "Elena, I'm going into the next room so you can talk to Barry. I'll be listening on the extension, and if you ask any questions, I'll take the phone. Let him think you're pleased about our little adventure."

"Go to hell."

"Think about it. I don't want him scared and neither do you."

"How do you think he's going to feel when you turn him over to Chavez? He'll be terrified."

"So let's put it off for as long as possible."

There was no other choice. But she would try to get as much as she could from Judd. "I'll talk to him. But not only today. I want you to call me every day. I want to know he's safe."

"And try to find out from him where we are?" He suddenly chuckled. "Good idea, but we'll be moving around." She heard a door open. "Hey, scout, want to talk to your mama?"

Barry was laughing as he came on the line. "Mama, you should be here. I saw lions and tigers. And monkeys."

"I'm glad you're having a good time, baby."

"But when are you coming?"

"I'm a little busy right now. Are you okay?"

"Sure. Judd and I are going to a carnival tomorrow night. He said there are Ferris wheels, and booths where you win prizes. He's going to buy me cotton candy."

"That's nice. Don't eat too much." She was starting to cry. "I love you, Barry."

"Mama?"

"Galen's on the line, in the other room," she said hurriedly. "He wants to talk to you. Good-bye, Barry. I'll talk to you tomorrow." She hung up and closed her eyes. Damn Judd. Damn him to hell.

"Barry sounds okay," Galen said as he came back into the room.

"Why shouldn't he? He thinks he's on this grand vacation." She sank down into the kitchen chair. "If Judd is making a deal with Chavez, then he'll want to remain in the general area. Barry said he's

going to a carnival tomorrow night. How can we find out where there are carnivals playing in the Southeast?"

"Local licensing bureaus? Internet? I'll try both."

"He talked about lions. Could they be near a wildlife park?"

"Can you use a computer?"

"Even guerrilla warfare depends on technology these days. I'll check out wildlife parks while you call the licensing boards."

He checked his watch. "They'll be closed now. We have to wait."

"I don't want to wait until—"

"We do have another option. We can go and stake out Chavez."

"What?"

"He's on a yacht, cruising the Florida coast."

"And how long have you known this?"

"Since just before we went to Orlando."

"And you didn't tell me?" She studied his expression. "You were going after him yourself." He didn't answer. "Dammit, I don't *want* you to protect me."

"Suppose we skip past history and concentrate on finding Barry. I thought you'd be glad we have another possibility."

She was very glad, and her indignation paled in comparison. "Don't do it again. Everything has to be open and above board."

"It will be. Remember, I care about Barry too. I'll do everything I can, as quick as I can."

"Thank you, I know you will. I didn't mean to—"

"It's okay. You've been through a lot in the last few days, and you sure didn't need this." He turned and went back into the living room. "I have to alert the security guys. I don't think we're in any danger of Judd selling our location to Chavez, but it doesn't hurt to take a few precautions. Then I'll get on the phone and call the newspaper and see if they have any listings or advertisements for carnivals."

She was glad he'd left her alone. She needed a moment to get herself together. She shouldn't have spoken harshly. It was just—

Barry. Oh, God, don't fall apart. Get busy. They had a chance of finding Judd.

Would it be in time?

"CHAVEZ? THIS IS JUDD Morgan. You don't know me, but we're going to do some business."

"You're right, I don't know you from Adam. How did you get my number?"

"Sean Galen."

There was a silence. "Let me talk to him."

"That's not possible. We've parted ways, but I took a good-bye present. Five years old. Cute little tyke."

Another silence. "You're lying."

"I'm not lying. Do you know what the kid looks like?"

"I've seen pictures of him."

"You're going to receive another one by FedEx tomorrow. This one has Barry holding today's paper. Get out your magnifying glass and check the date."

"You're offering to sell him to me."

"If the price is right. If not, I'll send him back to Elena."

"Who are you?"

"You have my name. It's not a false one. I'm sure you'll have checked me out by the time you receive the photo." He paused. "You want other ID? I was the shooter at the Kissimmee Hotel. I took down two of your men besides Luis Kyler. I'll call back tomorrow. I want you to know that I have the merchandise and I can deliver." Judd hung up and leaned back in the chair.

ELENA and Galen didn't get the information they needed until late the next afternoon.

"Three touring carnivals operating in Georgia, one in Alabama, and one in North Carolina," Galen said. "And the only one near a wild-game park is the one outside Birmingham, Alabama, about two and a half hours' drive."

"Then let's go. It's only six o'clock. We might catch—"

He shook his head. "It's a long shot, Elena."

"I don't care. Do you have a better idea?"

"I just don't want you to get your hopes up."

"Hope is all I've got." She headed for the front door.

He followed her out to the porch. "Judd heard everything Barry said to you. He might not even take him to the carnival."

"He's trying to keep Barry happy. An outing like that is a big thing in a little boy's life. I think he'll try to take him, even if it's only for a short time." Her lips twisted bitterly. "I've never had an opportunity to take Barry to a carnival."

"Hey, we'll take him to Disney World when we get him back."

When, not *if?*

"We'll get him back," he said quietly to her unspoken question. "Even if we have to take him away from Chavez."

"If Chavez gets him out of the country, it will—"

Galen's phone rang.

"Galen." He handed the phone to her. "Chavez."

She slowly raised the phone to her ear. "You bastard."

"Why are you so upset with me? It was your dear brother who killed his old mentor."

"You're the one who put a gun in his hand and gave him enough heroin to make sure he wouldn't care."

"I was expecting you at the hotel, and I told Luis to take care of you. Those drug addicts never get anything right."

"You didn't get it right either. Luis is dead, and I have no reason to talk to you again."

"That was unfortunate. But you took out two of my men in exchange. I never expected you to have a marksman on call. He was extremely gifted. Galen?"

"Why do you want to know? To put out a contract on him?"

"Just curious. How is my son?"

"He's not your son."

"He will be soon. What do they say about possession?"

"I'm in possession."

"Are you?"

"Yes, dammit." She hung up and looked at Galen. "I think Judd has already contacted him. Judd's moving fast."

"Then we'd better do the same. Come on, let's see if we can find that carnival before it closes down for the night."

10

THE carnival grounds smelled of cotton candy and popcorn. The shrill sound of the calliope grated on Elena's nerves.

"Where do we start?" she murmured. "The Ferris wheel?"

"As good a place as any."

She nodded, her gaze anxiously searching the crowd. Where are you, Barry? Where are you, baby? She looked up at the giant wheel, trying to see if he was in one of the boats that had stopped on top.

The wheel started again, and the occupants of the top boat came into view: two teenage boys.

"Let's split up," Galen said. "You start at the shooting booth, and I'll scout the opposite direction. We'll meet at the entrance."

"Right." She was already moving, searching, listening for Barry's voice in the crowd. It took only fifteen minutes to make her way back to the ticket booth at the front entrance.

"Nothing?" Galen asked.

She shook her head dejectedly. "Maybe we were wrong about this being the carnival. Or it could be that—"

"Wait. That's Judd's truck pulling out of the parking lot." Galen was running to their car. "He must have seen us. He's peeling out."

Elena looked over her shoulder as she jumped into the passenger seat. She caught a fleeting glimpse of a black truck with two occupants. One man, one little boy. Barry!

Then the truck was gone, traveling at high speed down the road.

"Catch him. We've got to catch him."

Galen's wheels screeched. "Fasten your seat belt."

By the time they reached the road, Judd was almost out of sight. Galen's foot jammed on the accelerator.

Faster. Gas stations, convenience stores. Faster. One mile. Two miles. "Where is he?" she whispered.

"We lost him. He must have turned off somewhere."

Agony shot through her. "We were so close."

"THIRTY million," Judd said crisply. "Not a penny less."

"You're crazy," Chavez said. "I won't pay more than ten."

"You can get that on a small shipment of coke to Miami. What I'm selling is priceless. You can't get it anywhere else."

"I won't pay it."

"Did you get the photograph I sent? The next one will show you a dead boy. Then no more dreams of a father-and-son business."

"You would kill a child?"

"Did you check my background? A kill is a kill."

"Fifteen million."

"I need more than that, as you probably found out. Thirty. I'll give you twenty-four hours." Judd hung up.

"Judd," Barry called from the bathroom.

"Coming." He stood in the doorway and looked at Barry in the tub. "Problem washing behind your ears?"

"No. I was just lonesome. Are you ever lonesome, Judd?"

"No. I guess I like my own company too much."

"I miss Mama and Dominic."

"Aren't you having a good time?"

He nodded. "But I worry about Mama."

"Your mama wants you to have this adventure. She'll be disappointed if she thinks you're not happy."

Barry frowned, troubled. "I guess so."

"Then get out of that tub before you turn into a prune." Judd grabbed a towel. "Tomorrow we're going to a petting zoo."

Barry's face lit up. "Oh, yes. Will they have llamas?"

"I have no idea. I guess we'll find out together."

"And I can talk to Mama and tell her about it?"

Judd draped the towel around him. "Absolutely."

"TIME for bed." Galen helped Elena out of the car. He led her through the house to her bedroom. He started to unbutton her shirt.

"I can do it."

"Sure. But you've had a knockout punch. Let me."

She didn't care. It didn't matter.

He quickly undressed her and tucked her beneath the blanket. "I'll be right back. I'm going to get you a couple aspirin."

Moments later he gave her the aspirin and then slipped into bed beside her. He cuddled close to her. "Try to go to sleep."

She closed her eyes. "I'm going to sleep. It hurts to stay awake. It's so lonely. Dominic is gone. Luis is gone, and now Barry."

"You're not alone. You'll never be alone again. Trust me."

CHAVEZ called at four in the morning. "He wants to talk to you," Galen said. "You're not in any shape. Let me handle him."

She shook her head and took the phone. "We have nothing to talk about, Chavez."

"I disagree. You didn't tell me you no longer have my son."

"I do have Barry."

"I've had talks with a man who says he'll give him to me for a price. He sent me a picture and demanded thirty million dollars."

She didn't respond.

"Naturally, I told him that I wouldn't pay it. Do you know what he said? The next picture he'd send me would be of a dead boy. I'm really tempted to let Morgan kill him just to see you suffer."

Pain knifed through her. "Morgan won't kill him."

"Wishful thinking. I researched him thoroughly, and his background is very nasty. Should I do it? Is it worth it to me? You'll have to wonder, won't you?"

"You want my son. It will be worth it to you."

"Your voice is shaking. If I do decide to ransom my son, I'll be in total control of his life or death. If I decide that you've spoiled any potential he might have, then I'll get rid of him."

"To hurt me? I don't believe you. It would be stupid of you to kill him. That would be a defeat for you."

"Maybe I'll have Morgan send that next picture to you." He hung up.

"I told you I should talk to him. What is it?" Galen asked as he took the phone from her lifeless hand.

"Thirty million dollars, or Judd threatened to kill Barry."

Galen swore. "Chavez could be lying."

"He was getting too much satisfaction out of hurting me."

"Is he going to pay?"

"I think so." She compressed her lips to keep them from trembling. "I have to think so."

"Even if he doesn't, Judd could be bluffing."

"Judd never impressed me as a man who bluffs." She got out of bed. "We have to find him. I have to do something, anything."

He studied her for a moment and then slowly nodded. "You're right. You have to do something." He got out of the bed. "Get dressed. I'll meet you downstairs in five minutes."

"Where are we going?"

"Outside."

"NO HOLDS barred." Galen threw his shirt beneath a tree. "Come and get me."

"I don't want to fight you."

"You won't hurt me."

"What is this? Some kind of therapy? This is useless."

He made a lightning step forward and swept her legs from under her. She crumpled to the ground.

She automatically rolled over, jumped to her feet, and gave him a roundhouse kick to the abdomen. He grabbed her foot and yanked it, bringing her down. She felt a surge of anger mixed with sheer adrenaline as she dodged to the side and attacked again.

It was not like sparring with Judd. Galen was better, quicker, and seemed not to feel the punishment. Fifteen minutes passed, and she was no longer sure whom she was fighting: Judd, Galen, Chavez. They were all whirling before her as she attacked and attacked again.

"Okay. Okay." Galen was breathless as he finally backed away. "I give up. I have some bruises to take care of."

"I hurt you?"

"No more than I expected. I imagine you'll find a few too."

The haze of adrenaline was gradually ebbing. "You didn't want to beat me. You were acting as a punching bag."

He smiled. "How do you feel?"

She thought about it. "Strong. Very strong. You have an unusual way of handling depression, Galen."

"Whatever works. Tender loving care wasn't doing the job. You can function now. Lord, can you function."

Yes, she could function. She could feel the blood flowing through her veins, and her mind was alert. Galen had given her release and confidence. "You weren't so bad yourself. Now we have to decide whether to stake out Chavez or continue to go after Judd."

"I'LL pay it, Morgan," Chavez said. "But I want a little something extra. It won't be anything you're not accustomed to doing."

Judd was silent a moment. "And what is that?"

"Elena Kyler. Alive preferably, but I'll accept her dead."

"Why should I give you anything?"

"I can stretch our negotiations out for a long time, and you want them over. Give me Elena, and it's a done deal."

"I'll think about it."

"I'll add five million if you bring her alive. I'll also put pressure on a few Senators I have in my pocket to take the heat off you."

"It's an interesting proposition. I'll let you know." Judd hung up.

"WHAT are we waiting for?" Elena stood at the window, gazing out at the lake. "I think we should go to Miami to get Chavez. Judd said he'd call yesterday, and he didn't do it." Her hand clutched the curtain so tightly that her knuckles turned white. "He's made his deal to turn over Barry, and we have to stop him. I'm frightened—"

The house phone rang.

She jumped for it. "Hello."

"Is Galen on the line?" Judd asked.

"He will be in a minute. Let me talk to Barry."

"After we finish. He's fine."

"How do I know that? You promised Chavez you'd send him a picture of a dead boy. You son of a bitch."

"At times," Judd said. "But it's not kind of you to say so when I'm calling to give you an opportunity."

"What kind of opportunity?" Galen had picked up the extension.

"To get her son back. I've made a deal with Chavez. I get my money. He gets Barry. But I've told him he has to do the delivery himself. No escort, or I don't deal."

"And you think he'll abide by it?"

"Probably not. I'll do a little scouting ahead of time."

"And where do we come in?"

"Tomorrow night. In the glade at the top of Blackjack Mountain. One a.m. You come in after I've got my money and take Barry away from him. Simple."

"Too simple," Galen said. "It smells like a trap."

"Or my bad conscience trying to do the right thing."

"Trap," Elena said.

"Barry will be there. I'm sure he'll hope to see you." Judd called, "Barry, your mother wants to talk to you."

GALEN moved to the desk in the living room. "We need a state map. We have some reconnoitering to do before tomorrow night."

Elena followed him and watched as he took out the map and looked up Blackjack Mountain. "It's about forty-five miles north of the city, off Highway 76. I don't see any nearby towns. Evidently Judd wanted his meeting isolated."

She nodded. "We're not going to have much time to familiarize ourselves with the area."

"Time enough. I don't think either of us was going to sleep tonight anyway. Let's get on the road."

THEY didn't get back from Blackjack Mountain until after noon the next day. They were sweaty, dirty, and scratched from brush.

"Get a shower, and try to nap," Galen said. "I've got to get a few weapons and some infrared night glasses from Hughes."

"You sleep too."

"I will." He paused. "We'll draft several security guys to take out Chavez's men near the road and stand by for an alert from us. But if we go up that mountain like a SWAT team, there's a greater chance of Barry being hurt. We don't know what Chavez will do if he's cornered. And we can't be sure how many of Chavez's men will be guarding the way up to that glade. We'll have to pick them off one by one on the way to him. We can't afford noise."

She nodded. "Knives and hands."

A few minutes later she was in the shower, the hot water washing away the dirt but not the cold anxiety that had gripped her all day. She was scared. It wasn't as if she hadn't done this before. She would just do what she had been taught. But it was Barry who was at stake.

Fear stabbed her, and she had to push down the panic that followed. She mustn't be frightened. Think of something that would give her strength.

Galen. Some of the fear eased. Yes, Galen would be with her this time. Together they would be able to do it. Together they would be able to save her son.

Blackjack Mountain, 12:05 a.m.

WHERE was the bastard? Chavez wondered impatiently as his gaze searched the trees surrounding the glade.

"Chavez, I presume."

Chavez whirled to face the man standing in the shadows of a huge oak tree. "Morgan?"

"Yes."

"You kept me waiting. Come out where I can see you."

"I'm afraid not. I'd be too good a target. Not that I believe you'd double-cross me. Is the money in that suitcase?"

"Yes. Come and get it."

"You come to me."

"Where's my son?"

"He's here behind this tree, sound asleep. I slipped him a Mickey, and he should be out for a few hours."

Chavez moved slowly forward until he was facing Morgan.

"No unfriendly moves." Morgan was pointing a gun at him. "Put the case on the ground and open it."

Chavez unlatched the case. "It's in large bills."

"I've no objection." Morgan shone a penlight on the bills and leafed through several stacks. He latched the suitcase and shone the light on Barry. "Your merchandise."

Chavez glanced at the sleeping boy. "Where's Elena?"

"She'll be here in forty minutes. She knows the boy is here."

"You're going to stay right here."

"I beg to disagree. Don't worry, I knew if I left you with egg on your face, you'd never stop hunting me. I don't doubt you'll put a contract on me." He started to back into the forest. "She'll be here."

"Did you believe I'd let you leave this mountain alive?"

"Perish the thought. But I'm going to do it just the same. I know you have this mountain crawling with your people. I had to take out one to safeguard my exit trail."

Judd was gone.

Gomez ran from the trees. "I couldn't get a clear shot. Should I go after him?"

"No. Elena may be on her way. I don't want her scared off. We'll get him later." Chavez shone down his flashlight. It was definitely the boy he'd seen in the picture. "I have my son, and I'll soon have the woman. If she does make it this far, I want you to leave her to me."

"ARE you ready?" Galen whispered.

Elena nodded and adjusted her infrared night glasses. "I counted five. There could be more."

"Probably are. They may be on the move. You take the trail to the left; I'll take the right. We meet at the glade at the top."

"Right. Chavez is bound to have a man or two in the woods around the glade. Will you take them out?"

"I'll make sure there aren't any surprises. Be careful."

She bent low and darted left.

TWO down.

Galen rolled the body into the bushes and jammed his knife back into its calf sheath. No noise. No alert.

He paused a moment to get his bearings and locate the next target. A guard a hundred yards farther up on the trail. He continued to carefully crawl his way up the side of the trail.

THE man's neck broke as she twisted it from behind. Elena let him fall and kept going. Don't stop. Move faster.

More of Chavez's men ahead. But beyond them was the glade.

Clear the way, her father had told her. *Be silent, but take them out. Clear the way.*

Clear the way to Barry.

PANIC surged through Elena as she saw there was no one in the glade. Not Chavez. Not her son.

"Chavez!" No answer.

Her gaze searched the trees. "Chavez, I know you're there. Come out and face me."

"I was just making sure you had no company. Where's Galen?"

Elena looked across the glade to where the voice had come from. She'd discarded her night glasses and could see only by the moonlight. "Hopefully wreaking havoc on your men."

"Then he's probably dead. I hope you weren't fond of him."

"Where's my son?"

"Here." Chavez's voice was farther left. He must be moving.

She started moving herself. "Where?"

"It's no longer important. I've heard that maternal love makes idiots of women, and you've proved it tonight. I was doubtful you'd walk into Morgan's trap."

"I'm walking out and taking my son with me. You've moved five yards to the left. Do you really want to attack me from the rear? Are you afraid to look me in the eyes?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Do you think I believe that lie about you just pretending I'd beaten you? I beat you then. I'll beat you now."

"You know I was telling the truth. It must be a terrible blow to your pride. Are you afraid you'll fail again?"

"You bitch. Knife?"

"Knife, hands, feet. Throw your other weapons out into the clearing. I'll do the same."

"The knife at last. Not that I didn't enjoy our less lethal bouts. Do you remember lying on the mat and—"

"Throw out your weapons."

"You first. You're so sure I want to redeem myself. Are you certain enough to throw out your guns?"

She had hoped to place him in a position of weakness. She wasn't sure if she'd shoot him when he stepped out into the clearing, but hand-to-hand fighting was a risk, and she had to think of Barry. Now she had no choice. If there was another man in the forest, she had to trust that Galen would take him down.

She felt a sudden surge of confidence. Yes. He wouldn't fail her. She could trust Galen. She threw her rifle and pistol into the glade.

Chavez stepped into the moonlight and threw out a rifle and handgun. "Come, Elena. Show me how you beat me all those years ago."

ELENA and Chavez circled each other, knives drawn. Elena sprang forward. Chavez ducked aside, and his knife darted out and raked her. She spun away before he could follow through.

"First blood, Elena," he murmured.

She whirled and gave him a roundhouse kick to the stomach. He grunted in pain and sank to his knees. Then he lunged to one side and regained his feet. "Good move. Now let's see you counter." He made a series of lightning-quick karate moves that brought him close enough to her that he got in a punch to the chin.

Darkness. Hot pain in her arm as his knife lunged forward.

She staggered back. She had only seconds before he would be on top of her. She kicked and connected with his groin. Chavez didn't fall. She had to follow through. Now. Ignore the dizziness.

She did a sidekick to his throat, and he fell to the ground. She

stepped forward to stomp on the side of his head, but he grabbed her ankle. Suddenly she was down.

She rolled over and straddled him, her knee pinning his knife hand while her own knife hovered over his throat.

"Very good," he whispered. "But you can't do it, Elena. If my man sees me down, he's to slit your son's throat."

"You're lying."

"Can't you see the blood spurting? I can—" He spit in her face.

She flinched, and his pinned arm broke free. His knife thrust toward her. She escaped it by inches as she rolled away from him.

"I almost had you." He was on his feet and coming toward her. His foot lashed out, connecting with her wrist, and her knife fell to the ground. She scissored his ankles between her legs and brought him down again.

He recovered and was on top of her, his knife coming toward her chest. She quickly brought her arm up to block it.

A bullet skimmed his cheek. He stiffened. "What the—"

Elena rolled, grabbing his wrist and pressing the nerve at the same time. The knife fell from his numbed hand, and she scrambled sideways and took possession of it.

Chavez tackled her and pulled her down. She twisted under his body and lunged upward with the knife.

He froze on top of her. "Elena?"

She pushed him off her and sat up.

Blood was gushing from the wound in his chest, and he was looking down at it in disbelief.

"I told you I'd do it." She was shaking. "Where's my son?"

He shook his head.

"Damn you, where is he?"

"Dead."

Panic soared through her, and her hand darted out and clutched his throat. "Stop lying. Where is he?"

"Elena . . ." His eyes closed, and he slumped sideways.

Barry couldn't be dead. Even with his last breath, Chavez had to be lying to hurt her.

"You're bleeding." Galen was kneeling beside her.

Did a man lie when he was dying?

"Elena, where are you hurt?"

"It's nothing." She leaped to her feet. "He said Barry was dead. He had to be lying. I have to find him. He had to be—"

"He was lying." Judd stepped out from the trees. "Barry is behind that oak tree. I gave him a Mickey, but he should be coming around in a little while. I'd get him off this mountain before he does. There's quite a bit of carnage he shouldn't see."

"That tree?" Elena was already running toward it. God, make it be true. Make him be safe. There he was. But he was so still. . . .

She fell to her knees and gathered Barry close. He was breathing. She rocked him back and forth in an agony of joy.

He's going to be all right. Do you hear me, Dominic? Our boy is safe.

"HE'S not hurt?" Galen asked Judd.

"Hell, no. He may wake up with the tiniest headache, but I'm pretty good. He shouldn't have any aftereffects."

"He'd better not. If Elena doesn't cut your throat, I will."

"And both of you are very talented in that area. I climbed a poplar tree near the glade and watched you operate. I had to keep an eye on the kid, and I thought I might as well be entertained. There's nothing I like better than seeing those slimeballs meet their Maker."

Galen's gaze narrowed on his face. "And helping a couple of them along yourself? I ran into two bodies on the way up."

"I got a little bored waiting."

"Then why didn't you take out Chavez?"

"That was Elena's job. She needed to do it."

Galen started to curse.

"You're protective. I'm on the outside looking in."

"You came in from the outside and kidnapped Barry, damn you."

"I needed the money," Judd said simply. "I was sorry I had to use him, but I was feeling the pressure."

"You not only used him, you used me. I brought Elena and Barry to the ranch, and I trusted you."

"I never told you that you could trust me. You didn't want to believe I'm capable of things you'd never dream of doing. But you might consider that the boy will have no bad memories of this episode. He's had an adventure."

"And Elena's been through hell."

Judd nodded soberly. "And I knew exactly what I was doing to her. I'm not asking for forgiveness. I know that's not possible."

"You're damn right it's not."

He turned away. "I'll be on my way, Galen. I have some intricate bribing to do."

"You're an idiot. They'll catch you and hang you out to dry."

"What do you care?" Judd smiled faintly as he strolled toward the trees. "I'm not your problem anymore." He dropped his black windbreaker on the ground. "Tell Elena to put this on. She's covered in Chavez's blood, and she wouldn't want to scare the kid."

He disappeared into the trees.

"LET me take him." Galen reached out and took Barry from her arms. "How is he?"

"Sleeping. But he stirred a moment ago."

"I called Hughes to secure our path as we go down the mountain. He should be here any minute."

She looked around the glade. "Where's Judd?"

"He left. He was probably afraid to face a mother's wrath."

"He should be," she said grimly.

"He left this jacket. He said you mustn't scare Barry."

"I'll do what I—" She glanced down at her bloodstained clothes and then grabbed the jacket. "Let's get out of here. I don't know if your shot alerted any rangers, but I don't want to find out."

"I didn't fire that shot. I was very busy disposing of Gomez. He was better than I expected."

"Judd?"

"He was perched up in a tree like a bloody Angel of Death."

"I might not have been fast enough. He distracted Chavez."

"But didn't take him out. He said you needed to do that."

"I don't want any favors from him."

"You'll have to accept that one. It's probably the only reason I didn't strangle him."

"He took my child. I can't forgive him."

"No one expects you to." Galen's arms tightened around the little boy. "Let's go. There's Hughes coming into the glade."

IT WASN'T until they were only a few miles from the cottage that Barry roused in her arms. "Mama?"

"Yes, baby. You okay?"

"Sleepy." He yawned. "I missed you."

"I missed you too."

He looked at Galen. "Hi, Galen. I saw so many things. So many wonderful things . . ."

"That's good, Barry."

"Where's Judd?"

"He had to go away on business. He told me to say good-bye."

"Oh." Barry's face fell with disappointment. "When will he come back?"

"I don't know. We're going to do some traveling ourselves."

Elena looked at Galen. "We are?"

"It's a surprise for your mother too." Galen gazed meaningfully at Elena. "There may be some stormy weather around here."

Elena nodded. They didn't know what kind of repercussions might result from the killing of Chavez and his men. There was little loyalty among the drug hierarchy, but it would be smart to take precautions.

"I think we all need a beach, and I know a place in the Bahamas that will fit the bill," Galen said.

Barry frowned. "Will Dominic go with us? He told me he'd take me to the beach in Miami sometime."

"He has something else to do now." Elena blinked back the tears. "But he'd want you to enjoy yourself."

Barry nodded. "Maybe he'll come later. He told me once that he'd always be with us."

She felt Galen grasp her arm for an instant, then release it, and comfort flowed through her.

"It's true. He'll never really go away." She cleared her throat. "You'll like the beach. Did you know that you can build castles in the sand?"

Epilogue

Nassau, Bahamas
Two months later

THE sun was hot on her back, and Elena turned over and drew farther beneath the huge beach umbrella.

"You're going to burn." Galen dropped down on the blanket beside her. He threw a towel over her legs. "You shouldn't go out at this time of day."

"I like the heat, and I hardly ever burn. It's one advantage of having olive skin." She turned on her side to look at him. "Where's Barry? The last time I saw him, the two of you were riding that poor mule down the beach."

"Nothing poor about the blasted animal. He stopped walking and made me pull him back to the hotel." Galen nodded at a group of children several yards away. "Barry's over there."

"Barry's seen more of you than I have during the last two months. Where have you been?"

"Here and there. I thought you needed to just lie in the sun and be alone with the kid." He stared out at the ocean. "I called Logan today, and he said we're clear to go back to the U.S. The DEA isn't going out of its way to investigate the killing of Chavez or his men. They're just glad to be rid of them, and Manero says there's no word of any push against us from the drug community. They're too busy dividing up Chavez's territory."

"So it's over?"

"Looks like it. We'll go back to the States and get you settled with proper papers. That's what you want, right?"

"That's what I want."

"Good." He got to his feet. "Then I'll set it up. We can probably leave in a few days."

She watched him walk back to the hotel. The sun was shining on his close-cut dark hair, and he was moving with his usual restless energy. He was clearly on a mission. Out to tie up loose ends and place a big satin bow on a job well done.

Not bloody likely, Galen.

SHE drew a deep breath as she paused before the door of Galen's room.

Just do it.

She opened the door. The room was in darkness. "Galen."

"Out here on the balcony. Problems?"

"Oh, yes." She crossed the room and went out to join him. "Big time."

"Barry?"

"No. Everything doesn't have to concern Barry."

"Could have fooled me."

"Because you're blind. I love my son, but he doesn't have to be the only one in my life. If you hadn't been so considerate, you could have taken me back into your bed at least a month ago. Instead, you made me feel uncertain, and I don't like that."

He smiled faintly. "And what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to tell you I love you and I think you love me. I'll give you some time to think about it, but it's only fair to let you know that I believe in marriage."

"And when did you decide you had all this affection for me?"

"I think it was right before I threw out my weapons when I was about to fight Chavez."

He blinked. "What?"

"I knew there might be a sniper in the trees, but I threw them out anyway because I trusted that you'd be there for me."

He threw back his head and laughed. "That's got to be the most original declaration I've ever heard."

"Stop laughing. It meant something to me. It's not easy for me to lean on someone else, to trust. You told me I didn't have to be alone. Well, I'm going to take you up on it. So make up your mind."

"And if I don't?"

"Then I'll make it up for you." She stepped closer and laid her head on his chest. She could hear the sound of his heartbeat beneath her ear. "I'll follow you all around the world. You won't be able to look at another woman, because I'll scare her off."

"You'll clear the way to me?"

"Anywhere. Anytime."

"I guess I don't have any choice, then. I wouldn't want to see violence inflicted on an innocent— Ouch. You kicked me."

"I'll do worse than that if you're not—"

"Shh. No threats. Do you know what it took for me to wait until you came to me?" He cupped her face in his hands and looked down into her eyes.

She inhaled sharply at what she saw there. "It served you right. There's nothing wrong with being a little aggressive."

"There is where you're concerned. You've threatened both my person and my manhood in the past."

"That was different."

"Everything that's between us is different. That's why it had to be right or not at all."

"And is it right now?"

His face was coming nearer, and his voice was only a breath of sound. "You tell me."

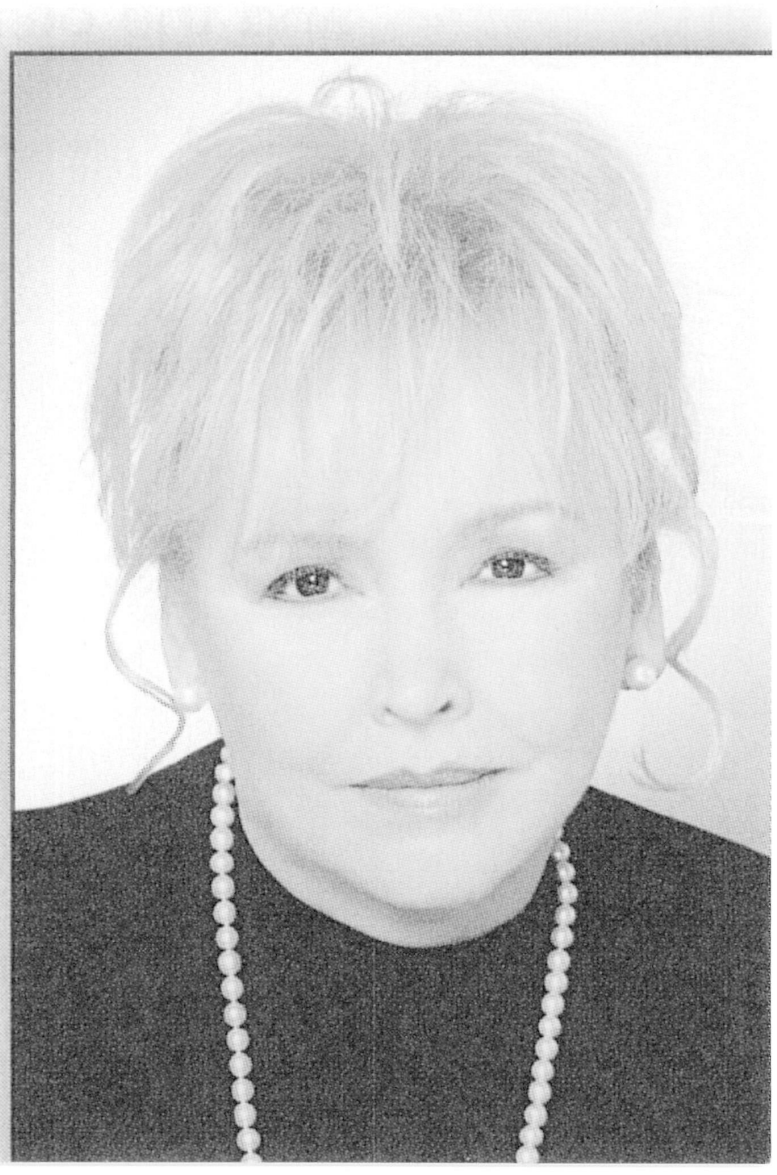
IRIS JOHANSEN

Iris Johansen is a woman of passion. This will come as no surprise to the thousands of avid readers who have been following her career since it began in the early 1980s. Long before she became a frequent contributor of suspense novels to *The New York Times* bestseller list, she was hailed by critics and consumers alike as one of the most innovative and highly successful romance writers in America. Passion, you might say, is her specialty.

The passion that drives her distinctive creativity is a wide-ranging curiosity. She adores doing background research for her novels, which have been set as far afield as Latin America and eleventh-century England. Johansen also enjoys the challenge of creating flawed human heroes, like Sean Galen. "I find perfect men boring," she says. "A perfect character is like a beautiful, placid lake. You can admire it, but eventually you look away and try to find a little action."

The Atlanta, Georgia, mother of two is a natural storyteller, as evidenced by her legendary output. In 1984 alone, the year after her first book, *Stormy Vows,* appeared, Johansen published an astonishing seven novels. In 1988 she published eight. At last count there are more than nine million copies of her books in print. This is her debut novel in Select Editions.

"I find perfect men boring."



Welcome to Elmwood Springs, Missouri:

where the people are down to earth,

the pace of life is what it used to be,

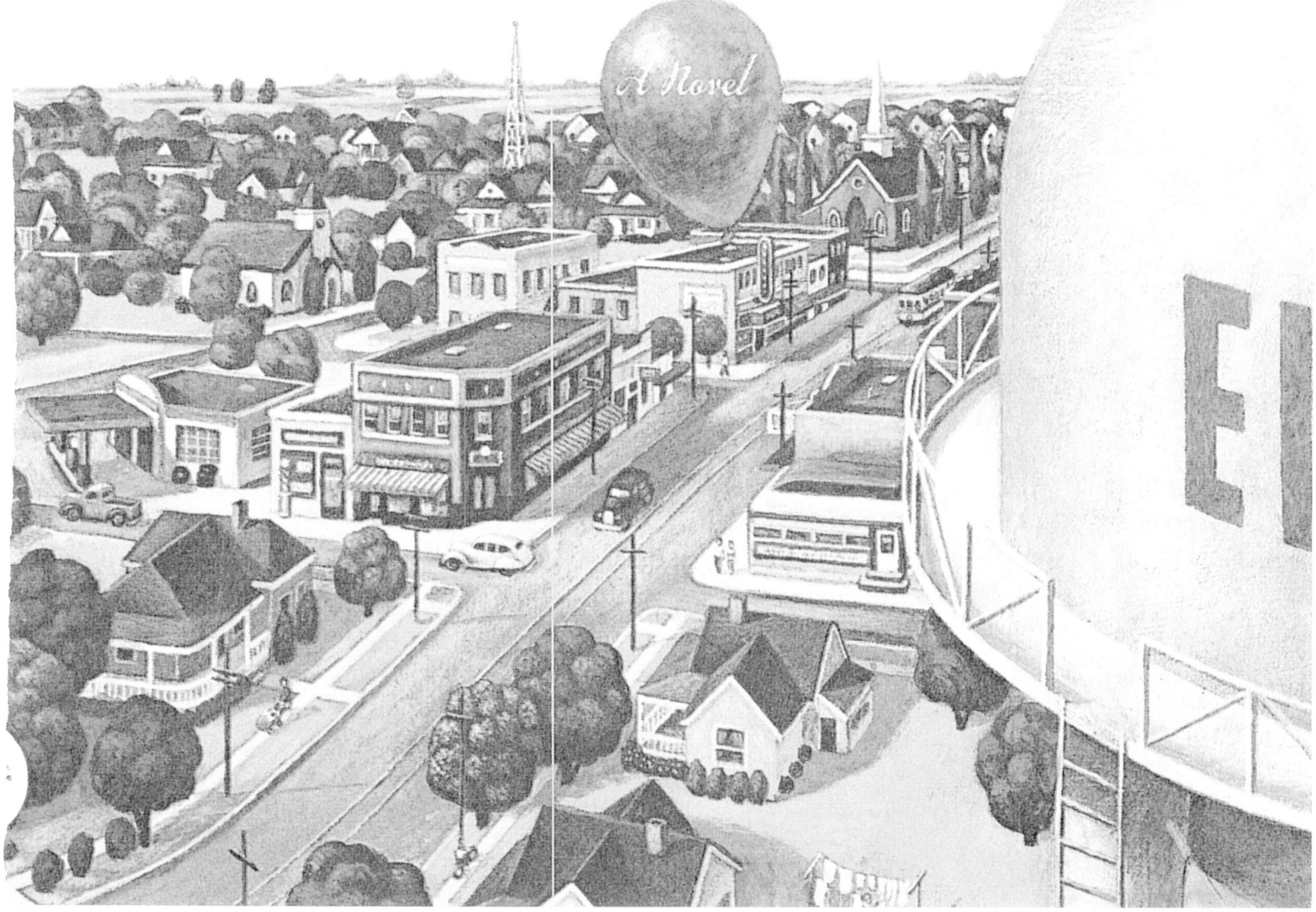
and the belly laughs are free.

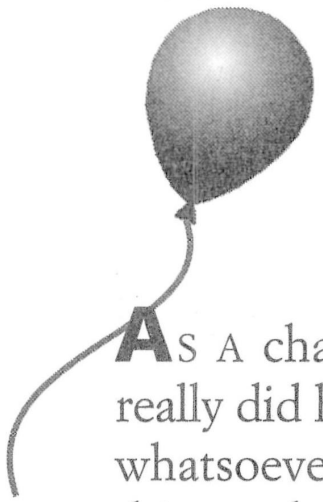
Author of *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*

FANNIE FLAGG

Standing in the Rainbow

A Novel





To the Public at Large

As a character in this book, I can tell you that everything in it really did happen, so I can highly recommend it without any qualms whatsoever. Although I am not the main character, I will tell you this much: I own my own house, keep it clean, and I pay my taxes. I've never been to jail, and I am most probably older than you are, unless you have one foot in the grave, and in that case, Hello, friend.

I do not claim to be a professional critic, but I like a book with a beginning, a middle, and an end and, hopefully, a plot and a few laughs in between. I hate a book that jumps around. Also I can promise you, this is not one of those personal tell-alls that will bore you to death by talking about how wonderful somebody is now, how bad they used to be but then got saved, and now they are wonderful again. And as of this morning, I have not gone addlebrained like my neighbor Mrs. Whatley, who thinks her grandson Travis is still working in the tire department over at Sears instead of where he really is and will be for the next five years unless he gets off for good behavior. But I am not one to carry gossip. I cannot afford to in my business.

Believe it or not, I still work for a living, although I sometimes wonder why, because with all the taxes I pay, I could just as well

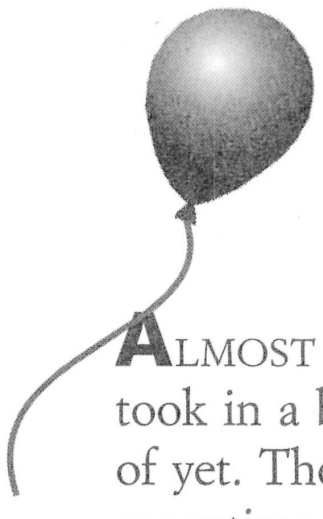
stay home and collect my benefits and do just as good, but when I don't fix hair for a few days, my fingers get all itchy. Besides, I have to go in and try to make sure my daughter does not ruin another customer's hair (a few hairs fall out, and they want to sue) or burn the place down again. Also I need the money. I am still paying on my car that Dwayne junior wrecked, not once but twice in six months.

I cannot depend on my children, but that's another story. Enough said. You get the picture. I have a lot of nervous energy, but I am not perky. There is nothing worse than a perky old person. It is not natural. Although I am not a main character, being in a book has made me stop and think. So before I get myself out of the way and let you start, I will say this: People's lives are sure ruled by a lot of what-ifs, aren't they? For example, on a personal note . . . what if I had died giving birth to Dwayne junior (not an unpleasant thought, considering recent events)? I would not even be here, but more important to the story you are about to read, what if Dorothy Smith had never met the Oatman Family Gospel Singers? What if Betty Raye Oatman had never met Hamm Sparks? What if Hamm Sparks had not met up with foul play? Oh, I could go on and on, but I won't. I hate when somebody tells me how something ends. And a word to the wise: Don't be like me and skip to the last page. I have ruined many a book doing just that. As I said before, I am only included in the story every once in a while, but after you finish, I'll bet you dollars to doughnuts you will wonder how I have managed to wind up as good-natured as I have.

Sincerely,
Mrs. Tot Whooten

P.S. Don't ever marry a man that drinks.

The Beginning



The Place: Southern Missouri
The Time: the 1940s
The Mood: Hopeful

ALMOST everyone in Elmwood Springs who had an extra room took in a boarder. There were no apartment buildings or hotels as of yet. The Howard Johnson was built a few years later, but in the meantime bachelors needed to be looked after, and single women had to have a respectable place to live. Most people considered it their Christian duty to take them in whether they needed the extra dollars or not, and some of the boarders stayed on for years. Mr. Pruiet, a bachelor from Kentucky with long, thin feet, boarded with the Haygoods so long they forgot he was not family. Whenever they moved, he moved. When he died, at seventy-eight, he was buried in the Haygood family plot with a headstone that read:

MR. PRUIET
STILL WITH US
PAID IN FULL

The homes on First Avenue North were located within walking distance of town and school and were where most of the town's boarders lived.

At present the Smith family's boarder is Jimmy Head, the short-order cook at the Trolley Car Diner. The Robinsons next door have Beatrice Woods, the Little Blind Songbird. Ernest Koonitz, the school's band director and tuba soloist, boards with Miss Alma, who, as luck would have it, has a hearing problem. But soon the Smith family will take in a new boarder who will set in action a chain of events that should wind up in the history books. Of course,

they don't know it, especially their ten-year-old son, Bobby. He is at the moment standing downtown outside the barbershop with his friend Monroe Newberry, staring at the revolving red and white stripes on the electric barber's pole. The game is to stare at it until they are cross-eyed. As far as amusements go, it is on a par with holding your breath until you pass out, or dropping from a rope into the freezing swimming hole outside of town, named the Blue Devil, which is so cold that even on a hot day, when you hit the water, the first shock jolts you to your eyeballs. By the time you come out, your lips have turned blue, hence the name. But boys, being the insane creatures they are, cannot wait to come crawling out covered with goose bumps and do it all over again.

These were some of the activities that thrilled Bobby to the core. However, for him just life itself was exciting. And really, at that time and that place, what red-blooded American boy would not wake up every morning jumping for joy? He was living smack-dab in the middle of the greatest country in the world. We had just beaten the Germans and the Japanese in a fair fight. We had saved Europe, and everyone liked us, even the French. Our girls were the prettiest, our boys the handsomest, our soldiers the bravest, and our flag the most beautiful. That year it seemed like everyone in the world wanted to be an American. People from all over the world were having a fit trying to come here. And who could blame them? We had John Wayne, Mickey Mouse, Roy Rogers, Superman, the Andrews Sisters, and Captain Marvel. Buck Rogers, BB guns, G-men, Miss America, cotton candy. Plus Charlie McCarthy and Edgar Bergen, Amos 'n' Andy, Fibber McGee and Molly, and *anybody* could grow up and become the President of the United States.

Bobby even felt sorry for anyone who was not lucky enough to have been born here. After all, we had invented everything in the world that really mattered. Hot dogs, hamburgers, roller coasters, ice-cream cones, electricity, milk shakes, the jitterbug, baseball, football, basketball, hot-fudge sundaes, and banana splits. We had Coca-Cola, chocolate-covered peanuts, jukeboxes, Oxydol, Ivory Snow, oleomargarine, and the atomic bomb!

We were bigger, better, richer, and stronger than anybody, but we still played by the rules and were always good sports. We even reached out and helped pick up and dust off Japan and Germany after we had beaten them . . . and if that wasn't being a good sport, what was? Bobby's own state of Missouri had given the world Mark Twain, Walt Disney, Ginger Rogers, and the great St. Louis World's Fair, and aboard the battleship *Missouri* the Japanese had surrendered to General Douglas MacArthur. Not only that, Bobby's Cub Scout troop (Bobwhite Patrol) had personally gone all over town collecting old rubber tires, scrap paper, and aluminum pots and pans. That had helped win the war. And if that wasn't enough to make a boy proud, the President of the entire United States, Mr. Harry S. Truman, was a true-blue, dyed-in-the-wool Missourian, and St. Louis had won the World Series. Even the trees stood a little straighter this year, or so it seemed to Bobby.

He had a mother, a father, and a grandmother and had never known anyone who died. He had seen only photographs in store windows of the boys who had been killed in the war. He and his best friend, Monroe, were now official blood brothers, an act so solemn that neither one spoke on the way home. His big sister, Anna Lee, a pretty, blue-eyed blonde, was popular with the older boys, who would sometimes hang around the house and play catch or throw a football with him. Sometimes he was able to make a quarter off the guys just to leave them alone on the porch with Anna Lee.

In 1946 a quarter meant popcorn, a movie, a cartoon, and a serial, plus a trip to the projection booth to visit Snooky, who read Mickey Spillane books. And after the movie Bobby could go next door to the Trolley Car Diner, where Jimmy Head, their boarder, would fry him a burger. Or he might stop by the drugstore on the corner and read a few of the newest comic books. His father was the pharmacist, so he was allowed to look at them for free as long as he did not wrinkle or spill any food on them.

Downtown Elmwood Springs was only one long block, so there was never any danger of getting lost, and the year-round weather couldn't have been more perfect if he had ordered it off a menu.

Each October a nice big round orange harvest moon appeared just in time for Halloween. Thanksgiving Day was always crisp and cool enough to go outside and play tag after a big turkey dinner, and snow fell once or twice a year, just when he needed a day off from school. And then came spring, with crickets, frogs, and little green leaves on the trees again, followed by summer, sleeping out on the screened porch, fishing, and hot, bright sunny days at Cascade Plunge, the town's swimming pool.

Although Mr. Bobby Smith had only been on this earth for a very short time and at present occupied only four feet eight inches of it, he was already a man of considerable property, most of which he kept in his room—on the floor, on the walls, on the bed, under the bed, hanging from the ceiling. As the decorators would say, he was going in for that casual, devil-may-care, cluttered look his mother had the nerve to say looked like a Salvation Army junk store. It was only an average-sized bedroom, but to Bobby it was a magical kingdom full of priceless treasures. Among his possessions that year were a homemade slingshot, a bag of marbles, one Little Orphan Annie decoder pin, one glow-in-the-dark ring, one compass, one Erector set, three yo-yos, a boy's hairbrush with a decal of the Lone Ranger on it (a birthday present from Monroe), a cardboard Firestone filling station complete with pumps, a bookshelf full of ten-cent Terry and the Pirates, Joe Palooka, and Red Ryder books. Under the bed were several Porky the Pig, Little Audrey, and Casper the Friendly Ghost comic books, plus an L&N train set.

Bobby had traveled a million miles in the L&N train, ridden up treacherous mountains and over raging rivers, and in the little plane hanging from the ceiling he had flown around the world, often over Amazon jungles teeming with alligators. So great was his imagination that when he rode a broomstick handle around the backyard, he could see the dust and hear the sound of thundering hoofs as he galloped across the dry western desert. That year he went to sleep each night with his eyes full of cowboys and Indians and his head filled with voices. "Tom Mix and the Ralston Straight Shooters are on the air!" "From out of the West comes America's fighting cow-

boy!" "Quaker Oats. Delicious, nutritious, makes you feel ambitious!" And his favorite: "Hi-yo, Silver, away!"

An outside observer might think his life was just about perfect. However, to be fair, there were two troublesome drawbacks to being Bobby Smith. One was his appearance. He was a nice-enough-looking boy, with brown eyes and brown hair. His teeth were straight. His ears stuck out slightly but nothing out of the ordinary. One problem was that his mouth turned up a bit at both corners, making him look like he knew a secret and was pleased about it. This expression caused his mother and his teachers to ask constantly, "What are you up to?" even when he wasn't up to anything.

The other drawback was his parents. Everybody knew who they were and would tell on him the minute he did something wrong. His father—the town's only pharmacist, a Mason, a Rotarian, an Elk, and a senior elder at the First Methodist Church—was on a first-name basis with the entire town. But to make matters worse, his mother was a local radio personality known as Neighbor Dorothy, who broadcast her show from their living room five days a week. And each year she would send her listening audience Christmas cards with the family's picture on it, so that people for miles around knew who he was. To add insult to injury, his personal and private business was often discussed on his mother's radio show for all the world to hear.

His only consolation was that this was a cross both Smith children had to bear. Last year his sister had gotten hysterical when their mother happened to mention that Anna Lee did not have a date for the prom, because she was holding out, hoping the boy she thought looked just like Glenn Ford—her movie-star crush at the time—would ask her. When Anna Lee heard that piece of information going out over the airwaves, she ran through the house screaming as if someone had shot her, and she flung herself on the bed sobbing, "Oh, Mother, how could you? You've ruined my life. I'll never get another date as long as I live. I might as well kill myself."

At the time, Bobby thought it was pretty funny, but he was not yet at the sensitive stage where what other people thought about

you was a matter of life and death. So for the moment, other than not being able to get away with much, he didn't have a care in the world, and like most ten-year-old boys, he believed that something wonderful was always just about to happen.

IN THE late 1920s and early 1930s, as more and more electric lines were strung down county roads to the farmhouses, the long, lonely days of isolated farmwives living far away from their nearest neighbors were suddenly filled with the friendly voices of other women coming into their homes via the radio. As early as 1924, all over the Midwest, women known as "radio homemakers" began broadcasting, supplying the wives with new recipes, tips for raising children, household hints, gardening advice, local news, and entertainment, but most important, a daily visit from a good friend.

One such radio homemaker was Bobby's mother, Mrs. Dorothy Smith, who broadcast from her home in Elmwood Springs, Missouri, between 9:30 and 10:00 a.m. over local radio station WDOT, number 66 on your dial. She was certainly qualified for the job. Besides loving to talk, she had gone to Boston to study and had come home two years later armed with a degree in home economics and child-care and with her eye on Robert "Doc" Smith, who had recently graduated from the University of Tennessee's School of Pharmacy. Six months later they were walking down the aisle of the First Methodist Church, anxious to settle down and start a family. Dorothy began broadcasting in 1938 and over the years became known to her many listeners as, simply, Neighbor Dorothy.

Every day, Nalon Klegg, the male announcer from the main station in Poplar Bluff, would introduce her with the phrase "And now, here she is from that little white house just around the corner from wherever you are, your neighbor and mine, the lady with the smile in her voice, Neighbor Dorothy . . . with Mother Smith on the organ." Her mother-in-law would then break into a rousing rendition of the show's theme, "On the Sunny Side of the Street."

This theme song was not chosen by accident. When Doc bought the house, he knew his wife would love to have plants blooming in

every window, so he made sure the new house really was on the sunny side of the street. Neighbor Dorothy was a pleasingly plump woman with a sweet smile on her face, a face that eventually graced the cover of her cookbooks and billboards all over the Midwest. Most people, listening to her always cheerful radio voice, might never have guessed she had ever had a worry in her life. What most people did not know, and she never talked about, was their first child, a four-year-old little blond boy named Michael. Dorothy had thought it was just another childhood fever or maybe a cold coming on, but by midmorning he started going into convulsions. He died suddenly and with little warning. One day he was laughing and alive, and the next day he was gone. The doctors said it had been an unusually virulent bacterial infection.

No one can ever really be prepared for the death of a loved one, but losing a child is surely the worst pain a human being will ever have to bear. It struck them so suddenly and so hard that Doc's mother, a widow, moved into the house to take care of them. After a while Doc went back to work, but Dorothy was still unable to do anything except sit in the little boy's room and stare at the bed. She wouldn't eat, no matter how Mother Smith tried, and she couldn't sleep unless she took one of the pills Doc got for her. Though the doctors repeatedly told her there was nothing anybody could have done, she never really believed it. She asked herself a hundred whys and what-ifs, and she couldn't find one answer that made any sense. At that time Doc was little or no help. If anything, she resented the way he had seemingly just gone on with his life as if nothing had happened. She did not know that Doc was trying to hold himself together to be strong for her, that he often drove outside of town, parked the car, and sat and sobbed. The loss of their child was something they would never really get over. But after a year or so they were both able to make it through the days.

It was at this time that Dorothy first began to bake. It helped her keep busy. There were days when she baked as many as ten cakes. Soon she was overrun with cakes and needed to get rid of them, so when she said, "Please come in and have a piece of cake," you knew

she meant it. Gerta Nordstrom, her friend who owned the bakery, said her cake business dropped in half because Dorothy was giving so many away. Pretty soon Dorothy began supplying the Nordstroms and became well known for her baking. The year her recipe for a six-layer surprise upside-down pineapple cake took second place in the Pillsbury Bake-Off, she was invited to be a guest on a radio show in Poplar Bluff. In the midst of the interview she just happened to mention that she always used Golden Flake Lite-as-a-Feather Flour. When Golden Flake Flour sales doubled overnight, they offered her a show of her own. Soon the large radio tower with the red light on top went up in the backyard, and she was "on the air." Later, after Anna Lee was born, she and Doc began to be their old selves again, although the little blond boy was not forgotten.

Life went on pretty much as usual until one day, when Dorothy was forty-three, long after either of them had given it a thought, life changed again. The doctor informed her that she was not, as she had suspected, going through the change of life, but was pregnant. Seemingly out of a clear blue sky, along came Bobby, who turned out to be a real change-of-life baby in every sense of the word.

MAYBE it's because children are still short and close to the ground, or maybe it's because their senses have not yet been dulled by the years, but to them days seem longer, smells stronger, colors brighter, fun more fun. Bobby was no exception. He viewed the world each day through brand-new eyes, almost vibrating with excitement. If you could have plugged him into the wall, he would have lit up like a 500-watt bulb. This was all very well for him, but for his family it was like living with a sixty-eight-pound puppy running in and out of the house all day. And this day, as usual, he and Monroe were up to something. They had walked almost a mile outside of town, to the water tower that had ELMWOOD SPRINGS written on it in huge black letters, with the intention of climbing to the top, an idea that would have caused his mother to have a heart attack or worse. Years before, a high school senior had fallen off and killed himself. But when you're ten, you are convinced nothing

will ever happen to you. Besides, he and Monroe had double-dog-dared each other to climb it, so there was no turning back.

Secretly both of them were scared, but overriding their fear was the lure of being able to brag to everyone they knew—except their parents—that they had climbed it. And just to make sure everybody would know they had done it, Bobby had come up with a plan. He had gone over to Warren's Hardware and bought a large ball of heavy string. Monroe had a pocketful of red balloons that they were going to blow up and tie to the top of the tower to prove they had been there. When they arrived at the base of the tower, it was so high it hurt their necks to look up at it. People said that from the top you could see all the way to Iowa. Monroe, a chunky carrot-topped boy with pinkish skin, suddenly looked a little pale. "Who's gonna go first?" Bobby made no move as Monroe said, "This was your idea. You should get to go first."

"No, it's okay. You can go first if you want to. I don't care."

"No. Fair is fair. You're the one who thought it up—you go."

Bobby could not back down now. "Okay. If you're scared, I'll go first if you want me to."

"I'm not scared. It was just your idea, that's all."

"Then you go first if you want to."

Monroe looked back up at the top. "I don't want to."

Bobby assumed a nonchalant attitude. "All right, I'll go first, but remember, Macky Warren said the trick is not to look down until you get up there."

Bobby took a deep breath and put his foot on the first rung of the ladder. It was a long climb. What they had not counted on was how hot the sun would be the higher they got, or how hard it was to hold on to the slippery rails with sweaty hands, not to mention the wind that almost blew them off the ladder. After what seemed an hour of climbing, they finally made it, both of them dripping wet with perspiration, hot, and thirsty. When they stepped off the ladder onto the small round corrugated-steel platform at the top, their legs were so shaky that they had to sit down. Monroe's face was now about as bright red as the balloons in his pocket.

After a while they mustered the strength to stand up and look over the side. The first thing Monroe said was, "Whoa! We must be ten thousand hundred feet up, higher than an airplane or the Empire State Building even!" They weren't, of course, but you sure could have fooled them. Bobby and Monroe had never seen the world from anything higher than a tree or the top of a garage.

Bobby was stunned. He had not known what the world would look like from this far up. He had thought maybe it would look round, like the globe in his father's den, but it was all flat! Nothing before him but big flat brown and green squares as far as the eye could see. When Monroe spotted their town off to the right and pointed it out, Bobby's mouth hung open in disbelief. Elmwood Springs, which an hour ago had seemed such an enormous place, was now nothing more than a block of buildings, houses, and streets no bigger than an inch. The small black specks walking back and forth were no bigger than ants, and the cars looked like toys.

Monroe said, "Look, there's your house. See the radio tower?"

Bobby peered over to where Monroe was pointing. It was his house all right. He could see the red light on top of the radio tower, and if he squinted, he could just make out a black speck moving around in the backyard, hanging clothes on a clothesline. Then it struck him: That speck was his mother! At once another thought hit him, scaring him half to death. What if he were at home right now and out in the yard and somebody else was up here looking down at him? Then *he* would be no bigger than an ant. From up here, he would no longer be the huge center of his huge universe, the apple of his parents' eyes. From up here, he would be just another black dot. Suddenly he broke out in a cold sweat. "I've got to go home. My mother's calling me," he said. He started back down, leaving a startled Monroe calling after him, "Wait. You can't go. We haven't done the balloons yet. Wait!" Bobby did not hear him. His only thought was to get on the ground as fast as he could. He had to get back home, where he was the right size.

But Monroe was not going to leave. If he had climbed all the way to the top, people were going to know it. The heck with Bobby

Smith; he would blow up the balloons himself. As he pulled one out of his pocket, he suddenly remembered. He ran to the side and yelled down the ladder. "Bobby, wait. Stop. You've got the string!" But it was too late. Bobby was more than halfway down the ladder.

Sometime later Bobby hit the front door of his house running and didn't stop until he got to his room. When Anna Lee, who was out on the porch, saw the look on his face as he went by, she figured someone was chasing him. She got up to see if it was Luther Griggs, the big bully who was always beating Bobby up, but Luther was nowhere in sight.

Poor Monroe stayed up on the tower for at least another forty-five minutes, trying to attach one of those red balloons to the railing, but they all flew off.

For Bobby the day had been far more than just the failure of the balloon caper. It was the first time he had seen his life from anywhere except the center of his own universe. Could it really be that he was nothing but a small dot among a bunch of other small dots?

That night after dinner, when they were all out on the porch, Bobby went over to his mother in the swing, lay down with his head in her lap, and went to sleep, something he had not done since he was six. It was a warm evening, and the entire family, including Jimmy Head, as well as Dorothy's red-and-white cocker spaniel, Princess Mary Margaret, all sat out trying to catch a little breeze. It was a quiet night, and they were enjoying the sound of the crickets and the soft squeak of the swing. Dorothy looked down at Bobby. She smoothed the hair off his forehead. "He must have been up to something today, because he's dead to the world tonight."

Anna Lee said, "I thought Luther Griggs was after him again. He ran in the door this afternoon going about a hundred miles an hour."

His mother sighed. "I'm worried that the Griggs boy is going to hurt him one of these days. He's already a head taller than Bobby."

Doc knocked the ashes out of his pipe against the side of the porch. "Oh, I wouldn't worry too much. He'll have to catch him first. Bobby may be little, but he's fast."

Anna Lee, now a teenager, had started referring to her brother

as "that child," and she made an observation. "That child certainly gets into a lot of trouble, doesn't he, Mother?"

"Yes. He's just at that age, I suppose."

"Was I ever like that?" asked Anna Lee.

"No. You were just a little angel—wasn't she, Mother?"

Mother Smith agreed. "Absolutely. I used to take you everywhere, and all I did was put you down with one of your dolls and I never heard a peep out of you."

"You loved your dolls," Dorothy said. "That big Raggedy Ann was your favorite. What ever happened to that doll?"

"Bobby knocked its head off."

"Oh."

Just then Tot Whooten, a frazzled-looking woman, walked by on the sidewalk in a hurry. She waved her hand and called out, "Momma's left her purse at the picture show again, and I've got to get there before they close."

Mother Smith shook her head. "Poor Tot. That's the second time this week."

Dorothy agreed. "Poor Tot." A few minutes later Dorothy said, "I wish Bobby hadn't done that to Raggedy Ann. You just loved that doll. You even took it to first grade with you." She gave her daughter a sad, wistful look. "It seems like only yesterday I was taking you to your first day of school. You and Raggedy Ann. I watched you go up the steps, and when you got to the top, you turned and gave me a little wave and went on in. And oh, it nearly broke my heart. I was losing my little girl. I stood there on the street just crying my eyes out."

Anna Lee said, "You *did?*" This was the first time she had heard this story. "Were you that upset when Bobby went off to first grade?"

Dorothy looked down at her sleeping son. "I hate to say it, but I think I was actually relieved. The day before, he ruined all six cakes I had baked for the church sale—ran his finger around the bottom of each one and ate the icing. So no, I was glad to let somebody else have him for a while. But boys are different. When you get married and have one of your own, you'll see."

Anna Lee shook her head. "Not me. I'm only having girls."

Mother Smith laughed. "That's not something you can control, honey."

"Then I'm not ever getting married."

Mother Smith smiled. "That's what we all say until Mr. Right comes waltzing in the door. Isn't that right, Dorothy?"

"It was for me. I told everyone I was going to New York to go on the stage and become the next Sarah Bernhardt. Then your father asked me to the Christmas dance, and there went my Broadway career plans out the window." Dorothy moved a little in the swing, and Bobby's head moved with her. "My leg has gone to sleep. I don't know what he has in his head, but it weighs a ton."

"Rocks probably," said Anna Lee.

Jimmy stood up, yawned, and stretched. "Well, folks, I guess it's about that time. See y'all tomorrow."

"Good night, Jimmy."

Dorothy looked at Doc. "You better come over here, Mr. Right, and take your son to bed. I need to work on the show."

Doc put his pipe down and walked over and picked Bobby up and put him over his shoulder. "Should I put his pajamas on?"

"No. Just let him sleep in his clothes. It won't hurt him."

Doc said, "Good night, all." As he got to the screen door, he turned to Dorothy and said, "Good night, Miss Bernhardt."

DOC was much older than the fathers of Bobby's friends, and it worried him because he could not roughhouse with his son like they could, but as far as Bobby was concerned, there were plenty of things he did with his father that more than made up for it. Doc was an avid baseball fan, and so was Bobby. They listened to all the games on the radio and studied the players' statistics.

A few years before, his father had casually laid out a handful of baseball tickets on the kitchen table and asked, "Son, would you like to go to the World Series with me?" Miracle of miracles, their team, the St. Louis Browns, was playing the St. Louis Cardinals that year, and everybody in the state was trying to get tickets. A friend of

Doc's from pharmaceutical school happened to be Luke Sewell, the St. Louis Browns' manager's brother-in-law, and Doc had been able to get tickets from him. On October 3 the two of them got on a train headed up to St. Louis with tickets for all six games, if it lasted that long, and they hoped it would. What a town. What a trip. Just him and his dad staying at a real hotel, eating out at restaurants like two grown-ups. Bobby had his picture made under the big steel Gateway Arch, and he got a brand-new Browns baseball cap.

The sight of the ballpark that first day, the crowds, the noise, the smells, the crack of the bat, the hot dogs, the peanuts—that sip of Pabst Blue Ribbon beer! It was all too much. Bobby was so excited he was dizzy. Their team won the first game 2 to 1—which gave them hope—but then went on to lose the series as expected. Although the poor St. Louis Browns were never to play in a World Series again, at least Bobby did not come home empty-handed. He was the proud owner of a real, genuine World Series baseball, a foul ball his father had managed to catch, autographed by none other than the National League's MVP of the year, shortstop Marty Marion. Bobby and his dad stood in line for about two hours to get the autograph, but it was worth the wait. When they got home, Bobby showed it to everybody. He was quite the big man around town, or at least until everyone had seen it several times. As for Doc, he came home happy and rested, a rest he had much needed.

On the surface, being a small-town druggist did not seem like such a hard job, but it had hidden stresses. Not only did he have to stand and listen with great patience to everybody in town who seemed compelled to tell him about every little pain they had, but people also brought him birds with broken wings to fix, and kids with cuts and scrapes, smashed fingers, and sprained ankles to bandage, and a variety of colds, upset stomachs, cat scratches, and poison ivy rashes. All this was fine, but Doc was also privy to private information and secrets he sometimes wished he didn't know. With his knowledge of medicine, he often knew exactly what was wrong with people by what the doctor prescribed. He was painfully aware, for example, that his best friend had a bad heart condition.

He also knew that poor Tot Whooten had been given a prescription for Antabuse and she was secretly slipping it into the coffee of her husband, James Dwayne Whooten, every morning to try to get him to stop drinking. Doc knew which soldier had come home from the war having contracted syphilis, what lady was taking pills for bad nerves, as well as who did not want any more children and who did. All this he kept to himself. It was especially hard when his own family was involved. The day his father's prescription for morphine was called in, he knew his dad was dying, long before his father did.

But if his job was sometimes complex, Doc's life at home was a pleasant escape. And it certainly was never dull. Just last week a complete stranger had wandered in and had dinner with them.

BECAUSE the Greyhound bus stopped in front of their house, people were always sitting around on the porch or in the living room. This, combined with the number of Neighbor Dorothy's fans that dropped by all day, caused this man to make an honest mistake. When he saw everyone going in and out and the radio call letters on the front window, he assumed the place was a restaurant called WDOT and decided to have a bite of dinner before driving on to Poplar Bluff. He parked his car, strolled in, sat down in the living room with Doc and Jimmy, who were reading the paper, and asked, "What time is dinner served?" Doc did not know who he was, but pleasantly told him, "In about thirty minutes." The man asked where the men's room was, went down the hall and came back, sat down, and picked up a magazine. As far as Doc knew, he could have been one of Dorothy's sponsors come to town. When Dorothy called out that dinner was on the table, the man got up and went in. Nobody asked him who he was, all thinking he was a friend of someone else's, and Neighbor Dorothy quietly put out another place setting. He thoroughly enjoyed the pot roast and mashed potatoes and happily chatted away all through dinner, entertaining everyone with his tales of life as a professional poultry inspector for the state of Missouri and how people always kidded him about being a poultry inspector with Fowler for a last name.

After finishing his second piece of coconut cake, he announced, "Well, folks, I better get on the road," and dug into his pocket and asked Dorothy how much he owed. A surprised Dorothy said, "Why, you don't owe a thing, Mr. Fowler. We were just happy to have you. I hope you'll drop in again anytime."

Mr. Charlie Fowler left town thinking Elmwood Springs was the friendliest place he had ever been. He *did* come back often, and they were always glad to see him.

An Ordinary Day

ON AN ordinary weekday Jimmy Head, the Smiths' boarder, is usually the first person awake. He gets up around 4:30, goes out to the kitchen, puts on the coffee, drinks a cup, then heads out the door before five. Jimmy has a big breakfast crowd and has to get the Trolley Car Diner ready to go by 6:00. Doc and Mother Smith are also early risers and usually come into the kitchen and have a cup of coffee together around 5:30. Dorothy is up and dressed by 6:30, starts her day by putting a batch of radio cookies in the oven for her guests, and then feeds Princess Mary Margaret and her two yellow canary birds, Dumpling and Moe. If it is summer, Bobby is up by 7:00, and Anna Lee tends to float into the kitchen around 8:00 or 8:30. She needs her beauty sleep. Doc is at the drugstore by 7:30, and it opens at 8:00.

The milkman, the iceman, and the bread man have been to the Smith house by 9:20, and Beatrice, the Little Blind Songbird, who sings on the show every day, has come over from next door. She and Mother Smith, who accompanies her on the small organ, go on into the living room to run through Beatrice's song. Dorothy and Princess Mary Margaret arrive for the broadcast around 9:25. Princess Mary Margaret greets anyone who is in the living room with a wagging tail and often sits in someone's lap during the show. Dorothy says hello

to her guests and welcomes her live audience, usually people waiting to catch the bus, then looks out the window so she can give her radio audience the latest weather update. At 9:30 on the dot the red light on the organ blinks, the on-air signal, and Mother Smith hits the first strains of the theme song. The show begins, and everyone in town and thereabouts is usually tuned in.

TODAY, fifteen miles outside of town, Mrs. Elner Shimfissle, a large-boned farm woman with a plain but pleasant face, dipped her hand into a blue-and-white speckled pan filled with Purina feed and threw it to the chickens in her yard. The chickens, mostly Rhode Island Reds, ran every which way with their heads down close to the ground. She wore a new green-checked apron over her somewhat faded floral-print dress, and comfortable old-lady white tie-up shoes.

She shielded her eyes from the sun, looked far out into the fields, saw her husband plowing behind the reins of their two black mules, and called out, "Whoo hoo, Will!" The small man in the large straw hat stopped, waved back, and then continued plowing. After she emptied the pan, she walked over to the water pump and rinsed out the pan and hung it on a nail on the side of the house by the big tin washtub. She looked up at the sun, guessed that it was getting to be about that time, and went on back in the house.

She had been up since 4:00 a.m. and had already done the milking, gathered the eggs, gotten her husband's breakfast, scrubbed the kitchen floor, done some washing, and put up sixteen jars of fig preserves. She figured she could afford to sit down awhile, and she went over and got her pencil and pad ready to take down the receipts. She turned on the radio—always set on WDOT. This morning Neighbor Dorothy started the show as she always did, with a cheery, "Good morning, everybody. It's a pretty day over here in Elmwood Springs, and I hope it's just as pretty where you are. We've got so many wonderful things to tell you about this morning that I can hardly contain myself. And sitting right here in the living room with me is Mr. Milo Shipp, who has traveled all the way from New York City to tell us about his brand-new book, *Hilltop in the*

Rain. The Goodnight sisters have promised to drop by later to sing a song in honor of our out-of-town guest, entitled 'My Sweetheart Went Down with the Ship.' They say it's a sad song, but it was the only one they could find with *ship* in the title.

"But before we get to our interview, I want to say a big hello to one of my brand-new sponsors, Verna Clapp's original strained baby food, and we'll be talking a lot more about that later in the program. First, just in case you're wondering what you are hearing, it's not your radio. Poor Tot's fox terrier got out again, and that noise is coming from a box of twelve of the cutest puppies you have ever seen. Don't you think so, Mr. Shipp? He says he does."

Mother Smith played a bar or two of "How Much Is That Doggie in the Window?" and Dorothy laughed.

"Well, they are absolutely free, and all Tot wants is to find good homes for them. Now, before we get to our interview and our songs, we have a winner in our What's the Funniest Thing That Ever Happened to You? contest, and here it is."

Mother Smith played a fanfare.

" 'Dear Neighbor Dorothy, One day I scrubbed and scrubbed my kitchen sink, but it would not come clean. It was then my daughter came in and asked why I was sprinkling Parmesan cheese in the sink. My husband took me for glasses the next day.' Signed Mrs. Mina Fleet of Mount Sterling, Kentucky.

"So congratulations! You have just won a five-pound sack of Golden Flake Flour, the flour that makes biscuits that make all your family say 'Yummy.' And I know just how you feel, Mina. I am headed for spectacles myself. Pardon me a second, girls." Dorothy put her hand over the microphone. "Bobby! Put that back in the kitchen where you found it right now!

"Now, coming up next is our interview with our famous author." Dorothy reached over and pulled a piece of paper she had Scotch-taped to the sack of Golden Flake Pancake Mix sitting on her desk so she would not forget it. "And speaking of books, here's a fun fact for you, Mr. Shipp. Did you know that a Mrs. Patricia Lennon of St. Paul, Minnesota, while going through her attic, found a library

book that had been overdue for twenty-eight years? Her library fee came to over three thousand dollars. The title of the book? *How to Improve Your Memory*. So make sure you get your books back on time. But before we get to Mr. Shipp, let me ask you this: Did you ever long for a trip south of the border, down Mexico way?"

Neighbor Dorothy signaled to Mother Smith, who immediately played a little of the Mexican hat dance.

"The people at Niblets say, 'Down with drabness and up with flavor!' That's right, viva Niblets brand Mexicorn! The whole-kernel corn mixed with red and green peppers. Now you can have a Mexican fiesta right in your own kitchen and have your whole family shouting olé!"

Meanwhile, Milo Shipp, a thin man in a bow tie, sat in a wooden chair, stunned, with a cookie in one hand and a large cocker spaniel on his lap, while a young boy grinding an eggbeater ran in and out of the room. Eight people carrying suitcases had just gotten up and left to catch a Greyhound bus that had pulled up and honked, and a puppy that disproved the old adage "all puppies are cute" had escaped the cardboard box and was now chewing on his shoelaces.

Several small children all under the age of six who were attending nursery school on the back porch continued to wander in to get cookies and pet the puppies, while two teenage girls kept sneaking around the corner to catch a glimpse of Mr. Shipp and giggle. In a few minutes a pair of middle-aged women, dressed alike, named Ada and Bess Goodnight, came in and proceeded to sing in perfect harmony a song about the sinking of the *Titanic,* nodding and smiling and waving at him the whole time. As he sat there dazed, Milo Shipp wondered what in the world his publishers had been thinking of by sending him into this madhouse. They had assured him that this Neighbor Dorothy woman sold more books on her show than anyone else in the Midwest. But now, looking at this unimpressive round little housewife sitting behind a desk covered with stacks of paper, potted plants, and a goldfish bowl sitting on a base made out of a green ceramic cat, he found it all hard to believe.

Twenty-nine minutes, one interview, and three recipes later,

Dorothy looked up and said, "Oh, I see by that old mean clock on the wall, it's time to go. It's always so pleasant to sit and visit with you every morning and share a cup of coffee. And when I look in our basket to see all the mail you send me, I feel as rich as a millionaire, so until we see you again, you'll be missed—and do come back tomorrow, won't you? This is Neighbor Dorothy and Mother Smith from our house to yours, saying have a good day."

BACK out at the farm, Mrs. Elner Shimfissle stood up, went over and turned off the radio, and threw what was left of her coffee into the sink. She wished that Neighbor Dorothy had been giving away kittens instead of puppies. She added the cake recipe to the rest and also jotted down the name of the man's book. She was not much of a reader, but that sounded like a good one. She then went about her day a little happier, feeling as if she had just had a nice visit with a good friend.

As for Mr. Shipp, he had no idea how lucky he was that Neighbor Dorothy had agreed to have him on the show. Her vast listening audience, which now covered a radius of five states or more, knew she never recommended a book she didn't like. And they could be pretty sure that if Neighbor Dorothy liked it, by and large they would too. Three weeks later *Hilltop in the Rain* suddenly popped up to the number three spot on the *New York Times* best-seller list—much to Mr. Shipp's surprise. But then, he was just one of the many who had been and would be surprised at what this woman could do.

WHILE Mr. Milo Shipp might have thought Dorothy's friends the Goodnight sisters were a bit odd, everybody else in town had known them all their lives and saw nothing strange about them. Of course, when they were born, their arrival caused a stir. Twins were rare, and everybody for miles around had come to look at them. Their mother, Hazel Goodnight, postmistress at the time, had them on display in the back room of the post office until they were five.

Although Hazel referred to them as identical twins and dressed

them as such, they were not. Ada, the elder by a minute and a half, was always ten pounds heavier than Bess, but to please their mother, they continued to dress alike. They even kept their hair in the same short hairdo, permed in tight little brown curls, and always went to the beauty shop on the same day. Both were good-natured and friendly and so close they often finished each other's sentences.

The only time they had ever been separated for any length of time was Bess's one-week honeymoon and during the war. After Pearl Harbor was hit, Ada, always the bolder of the two, surprised everyone by packing her bags, vowing to help "smash those Japs flat" in any way she could. A vow most people in town believed. She had led the women's softball team to the state championship in '36. Because Ada used to date Vern Suttle, a crop duster, she had some knowledge of planes, and eventually she wound up in the WASP flight-training program in Sweetwater, Texas.

When Ada joined up, Bess had jumped into the war effort on the home front. Not only did she take over running the Western Union office downtown, she became a Red Cross volunteer and helped serve food at the train station. Shortly after the war started, Neighbor Dorothy organized a women's committee to make sure that every troop train passing through Elmwood Springs was met at the station with hot coffee and doughnuts. Most of the soldiers were just scared young boys trying to be brave, but just the same they wrote their names and addresses on pieces of paper and threw them out the train windows, hoping to get some girl to write to them. At the end of the war Elmwood Springs prided itself on the fact that not one boy who had thrown his name and address out the window had ever gone without an answer.

During the war the girls spent hours every night answering letters. Hundreds of boxes of homemade cookies, cakes, candy, and knitted socks were sent overseas. Macky Warren, a cute sandy-haired boy who was too young to enlist, was not happy about his girlfriend, Norma, writing to so many soldiers, but he didn't say so. It would not have been patriotic to be jealous of fighting men. The soldiers who wrote back and said they had no girlfriend of their

own asked for photos. As a result Anna Lee and Norma and others had their pictures carried into battles halfway around the world and looked at several times a day by boys they had never met. But not all were pretty young girls. Bess Goodnight, thirty and married, had eighteen soldiers she wrote to. She sent all of her boys a photo of Rita Hayworth and signed each one, "Love and kisses from Bess."

The whole town was focused on winning the war. Neighbor Dorothy adjusted her radio recipes, leaving out or reducing items that were rationed. Victory gardens were planted in every yard, and Doc Smith was the town's air-raid warden. They staged several blackouts, although few really worried that the Japanese or the Germans would go out of their way to attack Elmwood Springs. But even without the threat of being bombed, the war years, as they did everywhere, brought heartbreak and change.

In 1942 the entire senior football team at the Elmwood Springs high school enlisted the day after graduation, and some did not come back. The Nordstroms, who owned the bakery, lost their boy Gene on Iwo Jima in '44, and several farm boys did not come back as well. Some of the older girls who had gone to the larger cities to take factory jobs returned with different attitudes and ambitions than they'd had before they'd left. Ada Goodnight told her sister that if she could fly a plane, there was no limit to what women could do—and she proved it. She brought her new husband home and proudly introduced him all over town as her "war bride" and soon owned and ran her own flying school. But even people who stayed home during the war grew up a little faster than they should have, including Anna Lee. At an age when she should have been concerned with nothing more than going to dances, wearing pretty clothes, and having fun, she received a letter.

October 24, 1945, Yorkshire, England

Dear Miss Smith,

I regret to report that your friend Pfc. Harry Crawford, United States Army, passed away in hospital this morning resulting from wounds received. Although I did not know him

long, I can tell you he was a lovely boy and displayed courage up to the very end. If it is any consolation, do know your letters and your photo cheered him greatly.

Respectfully,

Glyniss Neale, R.N., Veterans Hospital

It was shortly after that day that Anna Lee solemnly announced to her family that she had made a decision never to marry and to dedicate her life to the nursing profession. Her mother said, "Well, that's wonderful, honey, but let's wait until you finish high school and then see how you feel."

AFTER the war, the town's population had remained pretty much the same, except for the addition of Ada Goodnight's husband and the Nordstroms' daughter-in-law, Marion, and their new grandbaby, who had come to live with them. Beatrice Woods, known professionally to her radio fans as the Little Blind Songbird, first moved to Elmwood Springs in the spring of 1945. Although she was Ruby and John Robinson's boarder and paid rent, she was a distant relative of Ruby's. How she came to board with them turned out to be a stroke of luck for everyone. As Dorothy said, "Everybody was in the right place at the right time."

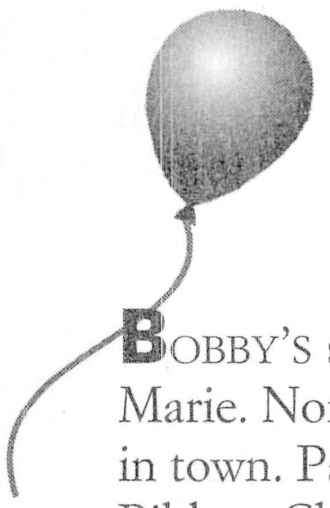
The right place in this case being the funeral of Mrs. Lillian Sprott, Ruby's oldest sister. Ruby and her husband, John, had traveled to Franklin, Tennessee, for the occasion. Beatrice Woods, who was Lillian's niece by marriage, sang at the funeral. At the time, Beatrice and her father lived on a small farm outside of town.

Blind from birth, Beatrice had passed all nineteen years of her life pretty much limited to the house. Her little Philco radio was her only window to the world. Except for church on Sundays or a rare outing, she spent most of her days alone listening to it and had learned just about every song she heard. From the moment she sang her first song in church, her reputation spread. People came from miles around to hear the blind girl who sang like an angel. One Sunday a visiting preacher, moved to tears by the sound of her almost ethe-

real voice, said it was as pure as a songbird at dawn. From then on, she was known as the Little Blind Songbird of Tennessee.

On the day of Lillian Sprott's funeral, Beatrice ended the service with "There'll Be Peace in the Valley." After she finished, there was not a dry eye in the house. John Robinson told Ruby they should get Beatrice to sing on *The Neighbor Dorothy Show*. Dorothy was always looking for talent. That afternoon Beatrice's father asked her if she wanted to go. She immediately said yes, and two days later she went on the radio and sang "Always."

A guest artist on the show was not an unusual occurrence, but never before had there been such an overwhelming response to a single performance. Letters came pouring in; everyone wanted to hear more from the Little Blind Songbird of Tennessee. She was such a hit that Neighbor Dorothy asked her to appear on the show every week, and the Golden Flake Lite-as-a-Feather Flour company agreed to pay her room and board if she would. Her father drove her back over to Elmwood Springs, this time with her clothes and her radio. Pretty soon she was appearing on the show every day. Since she was now living in Missouri, she dropped the "of Tennessee" and just went by the Little Blind Songbird.



Anna Lee

BOBBY'S sister, Anna Lee, had two best friends, Norma and Patsy Marie. Norma was a pretty brunette whose father ran the only bank in town. Patsy Marie's parents, Merle and Verbena, owned the Blue Ribbon Cleaners. Patsy Marie made the best grades of the three but was not a beauty. As her aunt Martha Ross put it, "She had old-maid schoolteacher written all over her from the time she was six." All three were nice girls, and if they had a fault, it might have been that they were right in the middle of their movie-star phase. Anna Lee's heartthrob this month was Dana Andrews. Patsy Marie's was

Alan Ladd, whom she had just seen in *The Blue Dahlia*. But Norma's movie star du jour was a puzzlement. She chose William Bendix. They asked her why him; he wasn't even good-looking. "Well, that's the point," she said. "*Somebody's* got to like him."

As the school year grew closer to the end, they concentrated on the upcoming high school prom, and movie stars took a back seat. The overriding question was what they were going to wear. All the high school girls wanted store-bought prom dresses. Wearing a "homemade" dress would be akin to sprouting a big red H on your forehead. Although Neighbor Dorothy made her own patterns and was one of the best dressmakers in the state, she knew that nothing would do but to let Anna Lee go down to Morgan Brothers department store and buy her dress off the rack. It would cost about three times as much, but her daughter had to have a store-bought dress or die of humiliation. At least that's what Anna Lee said.

In every school there is always one girl that all the boys are crazy about, and from first grade on, Anna Lee had been that girl. The only male who seemed oblivious to her charms was Bobby, who could not wait to torment her every chance he got. And she in turn could not wait to run and tattle on him for every little thing he did, and because she was older, everybody always believed her side of the story. Consequently, Bobby was not at all happy that Anna Lee had arrived on earth six years before he had.

BOBBY knew of only one sure way to get even with his sister for telling his mother he had been out at the Blue Devil, a betrayal that had caused him to get grounded and miss seeing *Wild Horse Roundup* the following Saturday. He and Monroe had been plotting for weeks. "It" was to happen the night of the prom.

His mother and Grandmother Smith were chaperones, and Doc always kept the drugstore open late on prom night so the kids could come in afterward and eat ice cream. Jimmy would be off playing Friday night poker with his buddies at the V.F.W. Bobby and Monroe had the house entirely to themselves, so they could put their plan in action without anyone seeing them.

After the deed was done, they went back to Bobby's room and waited. Anna Lee was the last one home, floating in on a pink cloud at around 12:29, one minute from her 12:30 curfew, still glowing from her romantic evening. She had danced all night—under silver paper stars and blue and white crepe-paper banners that hung from the ceiling of the gymnasium—with her date, Billy Nobblit, a Van Johnson look-alike, or so she thought. She dreamily undressed, still hearing the strains of "It Had to Be You" playing in her head. When she had put on her nightgown and brushed her teeth, she carefully placed her gardenia corsage in a glass of water and put it on her dresser. She crawled into bed tired and happy, a feeling of bliss that lasted about one second.

She immediately shot out of bed, screaming, "Snakes, snakes!" at the top of her lungs. She ran to her parents' room, threw their door open, and screamed, "Help! I've been snakebit!" and fainted dead away in a heap.

After Doc and Dorothy had gotten Anna Lee revived and somewhat calmed down, and after Mother Smith, out in the hall in her hair net and clutching her robe, had announced, "If there are reptiles in the house, I'm not staying," peace reigned briefly. Mother Smith would not go back to bed until Doc went over to Anna Lee's room to check. But it was no nightmare. Anna Lee's bed was crawling with about a hundred slimy, squirming red worms straight from Doc's own worm bed in the backyard.

"I don't know why she has to make such a big deal out of it. They're just harmless little worms," said Bobby as he was pulled out from under the bed by his father. And to make matters worse, the minute Doc opened the door, Monroe, his true-blue blood brother, had jumped out the window and run all the way home in his Hopalong Cassidy pajamas, leaving Bobby to face the music alone.

Anna Lee did not speak to Bobby for quite a while, until one day she forgot she wasn't speaking to him and asked him to bring her some milk from the kitchen. He pointed at her, saying, "Ha, ha, I thought you weren't speaking to me. Go get it yourself," and he ran off the porch and down the street. A disgusted Anna Lee went to the

kitchen and said to her mother, "What I don't understand is why you had to have another child. Why didn't you just stop with me?"

Dorothy smiled. "Well, honey, we thought we had."

Anna Lee looked at her mother in surprise. "What happened?"

"I guess the good Lord just decided to send us another little angel down from heaven."

"I may be sick," said Anna Lee, and left the room.

NEIGHBOR Dorothy started with a great big, "Good morning, everybody! Well, I could hardly wait to get on the air this morning because as Gabriel Heatter says, 'Ah, there's good news tonight!' or in our case, today, and we are just tickled pink and chomping at the bit to tell you about it. But first let me ask you this: Does your soap powder make you sneeze? Mrs. Squatzie Kittrel of Silver Springs, Maryland, says, 'Rinso washes my clothes fast in rich soapy suds, and on washdays it does not make me sneeze like all the others.' So remember, Rinso white, Rinso bright, the only granulated soap that is ninety-eight percent free of sneezy soap dust.

"And now to the *big* news of the day." Dorothy picked up the letter with the good news and beamed with pride. "You know, usually we don't like to blow our own horn, but we are all so excited we just had to tell you about it."

Mother Smith played a fanfare on the organ.

"Yesterday it was announced that Doc has won the Rexall Pharmacist of the Year Award for the second year in a row. He's to receive it at this year's Southeastern Pharmaceutical Convention in Memphis, and I plan to be right there to see him get it.

"Now, we have a lot more coming up on the show this morning. Beatrice is going to sing 'I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles.' Yes, unfortunately, it's that time of year again. Next Saturday down at the Elmwood Theater they are having the annual Bazooka Bubble Gum Double Bubble Blowing Contest—well, that's a mouthful—so mothers, get ready. I know Bobby is about to drive us insane over at our house. Pop, pop, pop, chew, chew, chew, night and day . . . And let's see . . . anything I'm forgetting, Mother?"

Mother Smith played a few strains of the funeral march and pointed to a jar on the desk.

"Oh, that's right. Thank you, Mother Smith. Last week we told you about a new instant coffee, but we have to take it off our list of recommendations. I am just as sorry as I can be about it, but it's just not up to snuff, as they say, is it, Mother Smith? She says no, and made a face, but remember our motto: If at first you don't succeed, try again."

Unfortunately for Bobby, his mother's motto was one he was to hear from her the very next week, when he dragged in the door having lost the bubble gum bubble blowing contest for the second year in a row. It didn't help him feel much better. He had practiced until his jaws were sore, but he came in sixth. Rats, he thought. Everybody in the family is always winning something but me.

DOC was home for lunch, and Dorothy stood by the kitchen table waiting for an opinion about the hat she had just bought for their trip to Memphis. He studied the object perched on her head, then said, "Oh, I don't know, Dorothy. I've seen worse."

"Well, thanks a lot," she said.

Mother Smith jumped in and offered, "I like it," and gave her son a dirty look.

Dorothy blinked hopefully. "Really?"

"Oh yes. It's very stylish. Don't ask him. He doesn't know anything about hats."

Doc readily agreed. "That's right. Don't ask me. I can't tell one from the other."

When Dorothy left the room, Mother Smith said, "Now you've done it."

Doc shrugged. "Well, they all do look alike, only this one looks like a pancake with some fruit and a dead bird on top." Beatrice Woods, who was sitting at the table, laughed. Doc leaned over and spoke under his breath. "Count yourself lucky you can't see it. You wouldn't know whether to shoot it or eat it."

After Doc had gone back to the drugstore, they all sat around the

table talking about the upcoming trip. Dorothy sighed. "I just wish I could lose ten pounds before I go."

Mother Smith said, "I wish I was eighteen again."

Dorothy and Beatrice laughed, and Dorothy looked at Beatrice and said, "Beatrice, if you could have any wish come true, what would it be?"

Beatrice, whose favorite radio show was the *Armchair Traveler,* thought for a moment. "I would wish I could get in a car and drive all over the world and never stop."

Dorothy reached over and touched her hand. "Would you, honey?"

"Oh yes," she said. "Wouldn't that be fun?"

"It sure would," said Mother Smith, and changed the subject. She could see that Dorothy was about to get emotional. What was doubly heartbreaking about Beatrice was that even though being blind had limited her life, she did not have an ounce of self-pity, and they had to be sure she never heard any in their voices. It was especially hard when the thing she wished for could never come true.

DOC and Dorothy arrived at the Peabody Hotel in Memphis for the pharmaceutical convention on Friday night, and the next day they were having a lovely time visiting with all their friends, unaware of the disaster in the making behind the scenes. In room 367, just down the hall, Norvel Float, entertainment chairman for the big awards banquet, was fit to be tied. He had just been informed by telegram that the singing duo Willy and Buck, known professionally as the How-Do-You-Do Boys, whom he had personally booked eight months ago, had gotten into a fistfight over some woman in Shreveport, Louisiana. Buck had broken Willy's nose and run off to Chicago with the woman. Needless to say, they had canceled at the last minute, and Norvel Float was left with 723 pharmacists who would have no after-dinner entertainment. He immediately got on the phone and frantically called every booking agent in the area, but not a single tap dancer, singer, comic, or accordion player was available. As a last-ditch effort, he called one of the local radio stations,

WRCC, located on the eighteenth floor of the hotel. The man there said all they had to offer was a traveling gospel group that had appeared on their station that morning and was still in town. Norvel hired them, no questions asked. The man on the phone hesitated. "Are you sure you want them? They're kind of raw."

"Listen, mister," said Norvel. "I'm desperate. At this point I'll take anything I can get. Just have them here by nine thirty."

THE banquet that night was a splendid affair. When Doc went up to receive his award, amid much applause, he looked so handsome and distinguished in his tux, with his silver hair glistening in the spotlight, that after he came back to the table, Dorothy whispered to him, "I'm married to the best-looking man here."

He laughed and whispered back, "You're just saying that because you're stuck with me."

Later, after all the other awards had been given out, the emcee for the evening came out and read what Norvel Float had hastily jotted down on a napkin backstage: "I hope you all enjoyed your dinner, and congratulations to the winners. And now, on with the show. Tonight we are lucky enough to have with us, all the way from Sand Mountain, Alabama, the famous Oatman Family Gospel Singers, and here they are, straight from their successful appearance on WRCC's *Yellow Label Table Syrup Gospel Hour* to sing some of your good old southern gospel favorites."

The curtain opened, revealing the five Oatmans—a mother and father, two boys, and a girl. The mother, seated at the piano—a two-hundred-pound woman with white skin, jet-black hair in a bun, no makeup, and wearing a homemade lavender dress—suddenly and without warning attacked the piano, one chubby hand banging out the rhythm while the other banged out something else. The small upright seemed to be jumping up and down, fighting for its life as she pumped away at the foot pedals. And again without warning, the large older man, the two younger men, all in matching suits, and the young girl who had been standing motionless sang out at the top of their lungs, "Have You Heard the Good News?"

There was not a person in the room who could not help but hear the good news. Minnie Oatman would see to that. Hers was the strongest voice in the group, a deep whiskey tenor so powerful it was said she could knock the paint off the back wall when she really let go. Over the next half hour the group ripped through songs like "Glory, Glory, Clear the Road," "Every Time I Feel the Spirit," and "Mansion on the Hill." As they sang, the pharmacists and their wives from New York, Boston, and Philadelphia sat stunned, while most of the southerners nodded and smiled and tapped their feet. But the Oatman clan seemed completely oblivious to the audience one way or the other and continued on with rousing renditions of "Hang On, It Won't Be Long Now" and "What a Day That Will Be."

They ended with a song that Minnie proudly informed them she had written that very morning while sitting in the hotel coffee shop having breakfast. She said, "It's called 'Can't Wait to Get to Heaven.' Hope you like it," and then she threw her head back and proceeded to sing out with full-throated joy. When she hit the E flat at the end of the song and held it, many people in the room heard the ice in their glasses crack. Some singers sing at the top of a note, some at the bottom, but Minnie Oatman had perfect pitch and always hit the note dead center with the accuracy of a silver bullet. More than a few in the audience still had a ringing in their ears long after the curtain closed.

It had been a lively show, to say the least. When it was over, Doc commented to the man next to him, "I'll say this for them: I never saw folks look more forward to dying in all my life." But Dorothy had thoroughly enjoyed it. She had heard gospel music before, but she had never heard it sung like this. What the Oatmans may have lacked in polish and style, they certainly made up for in enthusiasm. She and Doc were not particularly fans of gospel, but she knew that a lot of her listening audience out on the farms loved it.

While most of the banquet attendees headed for the bar, Dorothy headed backstage and introduced herself to Minnie Oatman, saying that if they were ever in the vicinity of Elmwood Springs, Missouri, she would love to have them on her radio show. Minnie, who had

worked up quite a sweat, was dabbing her face with a big white handkerchief. She said, "Well, bless your heart," then turned and called out, "Ferris, ain't we doing a revival somewhere in Missouri this year—or is it Arkansas? Look it up in the book. This nice lady wants us on her radio show."

Ferris Oatman, who weighed a hundred pounds more than his wife, struggled to pull a long, thin black book from his inside coat pocket. After he looked through it, he said, "We're booked at the Highway 78 Church of Christ outside of Ash Hill, Missouri, first week in July."

Minnie turned to Dorothy. "Is that anywheres near you, honey?"

Dorothy said, "Yes. I'll be happy to have somebody pick you up. Where will you be staying?"

Minnie laughed. "Oh Lord, honey, we never know till we get there. We stay with whoever can put us up. The church usually finds us a place. There's six of us including Floyd—he's out in the car. He don't work banquets, just churches and revivals, so if you know of a family willing to put one or two of us up for a week, let us know. You don't happen to have an extra bed or sofa, do you?"

Dorothy was put on the spot because the woman had just agreed to appear on her show. She glanced at the young girl in the group, who looked about sixteen, and said, "Ahh . . . well, as a matter of fact, Mrs. Oatman, we have a girl about your daughter's age, and I'm sure she would be just tickled pink to have her stay with us."

Minnie looked up to the ceiling, sang out, *"Praise Jesus!"* and looked back at Dorothy and said, "I tell you, Mrs. Smith, the Lord just drops good people right in our path every day." Before Dorothy could say anything, Minnie yelled, "Ferris, we already got one placed in Ash Hill," and then turned back to Dorothy. "That's real kind of you. Of all of us, she's the leastest trouble, hardly eats a thing. You won't even know she's there." She waved the long white handkerchief at her daughter. "Betty Raye, come over here. This nice lady wants you to stay with her when we're over there in Missouri."

Betty Raye, a pale, thin girl with light brown hair and brown eyes,

wearing a lavender dress exactly like her mother's, came over somewhat reluctantly.

Dorothy smiled at her. "Hello, Betty Raye. We're looking forward to having you with us. We have a daughter about your age, and I know she's going to be very happy you are coming."

Minnie nudged Betty Raye. "Tell the lady thank you."

The girl blushed and said something, but she spoke so softly Dorothy could not hear what she said.

Later, after Dorothy returned to the table and realized what she had just done, she said to Doc, "Anna Lee is going to *kill* me."

THE Oatman family was just one of many white gospel groups traveling all over the South and Midwest that year. Groups like the Spear Family, the Harmony Boys, and the Melody Masters made their living by appearing at small churches, singing conventions, revivals, and all-day sings and dinner-on-the ground events. The more successful groups began to advertise over the radio and were able to promote a good crowd at their appearance, but in 1946 radio appearances were a fairly new thing for the Oatmans. Ferris and his brothers Floyd and Le Roy had been raised on a hard-scrabble dirt farm in northern Alabama by strict Pentecostal parents. Because of his upbringing, Ferris believed that just listening to the radio, much less singing over it, was a sin. However, in 1945, after seeing how other groups were using broadcasts to tell people where they would "be at," Ferris prayed about it. A week later he said, "Minnie, the Lord spoke to me and said He wants us to go on the radio," and so it was settled.

Minnie Varner, the fourth child of an Assembly of God preacher, was born outside Shiloh, Georgia. The Varners were a musical family, and Minnie was playing piano in church by age nine. She met Ferris Oatman when she was twelve and he was twenty-four. She had been at an all-day sing and dinner on the ground, playing for the Harmonettes, an all-girl gospel group from Birmingham. When she saw Ferris, with all that black curly hair, she fell in love. Ferris felt the same. That night he told his brother, "I just met my

wife." Two years later, when she was fourteen, she ran off with Ferris, ignoring the warnings of her parents about marrying into a traveling gospel group. They said she would be living in the back of a car, hawking songbooks out of the trunk all her life. So far, they had been right.

After the two boys, Bervin and Vernon, and later Betty Raye were born, Minnie's parents bought them a small two-bedroom house a few miles from where she was raised, but they were hardly there long enough to do anything but wash and iron all their clothes and take off again. It was a hard life. During the Depression they lost Ferris's brother, Le Roy, their bass singer, who ran off to join a hillbilly band. Aside from the few dollars they made selling songbooks, they performed for freewill offerings, which could range anywhere from five to ten dollars a night, depending on the size of the congregation. Money was scarce. Minnie said the only consolations were knowing they were doing the Lord's work—and the food. Most of the churches were in the country, and there was always plenty to eat. In the homes where they stayed and at the numerous singing events, even during the Depression, they were well fed. Fried chicken, ham, pork chops, fried catfish, sweet potatoes, mashed potatoes, biscuits and gravy, corn bread, cakes, pies, and cobblers. They ate so much it began to look like a lot of the gospel singers had been picked out by the pound. In the Oatman family only Betty Raye was thin, and they couldn't understand it. But there were many things about Betty Raye they did not understand.

DOROTHY and Doc got back from the convention late Sunday night, and Monday at 9:30 Dorothy was back on the air as usual. After the show she went up to Anna Lee's room. She listened as Anna Lee told her how impossible Bobby had been while they were gone, then tried to find a way to gently drop the news about the houseguest that was coming next month. She started off with a casual, "And oh, by the way . . ." but it did not work.

"A Church of Christ gospel singer?" Anna Lee screamed. "In my room for an entire week? I can't believe it!"

"Now, sweetheart, I'm sure you will like her when you meet her. She seemed very nice," said Dorothy hopefully.

Anna Lee wailed and fell back on her bed in agony. "Oh, Mother, how could you do this without even asking me?"

"Well, it just sort of happened. Mrs. Oatman asked me if we had an extra bed, and you weren't there to ask. I thought you wouldn't mind. Besides, you might enjoy meeting someone a little different."

"Different! Mother, those people don't even go to the movies or dance or wear makeup or anything!"

"Well, probably not. But you can give up going to the movies or a dance for a week, can't you?"

Anna Lee looked at her mother in horror. "Why do I have to give it up? I'm a Methodist."

"It wouldn't be nice to do something she couldn't do."

"How am I supposed to entertain her if she can't do anything?"

"Oh, I don't know, Anna Lee. I'm sure you'll come up with a lot of things, and it's not going to kill you to be nice to someone for one week. We'll talk about this later."

Dorothy was almost out the door when Anna Lee added, "All right, but if she shows up here wearing some tacky homemade dress, I'm not taking her anywhere. She can just stay home."

Her mother rarely got upset with her, but Anna Lee knew in an instant she had gone too far. Dorothy turned around. "Anna Lee, don't tell me I have raised a snob. If I thought for one minute that you would ever be unkind to anyone, much less some poor girl who is probably looking forward to meeting you, it would just break my heart. I told that girl you would be happy to have her here, but I guess I was wrong."

Anna Lee immediately felt terribly ashamed of herself. "I'm sorry, Mother. I didn't mean it."

Dorothy stood there thinking, then said, "I'll get in touch with Mrs. Oatman tonight and tell her they will have to make other plans."

"No, *don't.* I'm sorry, Mother."

But Dorothy turned and left the room. Anna Lee ran after her, pleading, "No! Please don't. Mother, please!"

"I'm not having that girl come where she's not wanted."

"But I want her to come. I promise I'll do anything she wants. Please let her come! I'll kill myself if you don't let her come." With that, she collapsed on the floor in full-blown teenage hysteria. "Please! Please! She can have my entire room. She can wear all my clothes. I'll sleep with Grandma. I'll entertain her night and day, I promise. Please don't call!"

Dorothy had seen these histrionics before and was not convinced. "All right, Anna Lee, get up. I won't call today. But I'm not promising anything. Let's just see how you feel about it tomorrow."

From that day forward Anna Lee made it a point at dinner to mention that she just couldn't wait for Betty Raye to get there. Although it was not quite true, Anna Lee would rather walk through fire than ever disappoint her mother again.

A MONTH later, at about four in the afternoon, a dusty old four-door green Packard packed full of people, songbooks, and clothes, with sound equipment piled on the top and on the running boards, drove up to the Smith house. A hand-painted sign on the back read THE OATMAN FAMILY—TRAVELING FOR JESUS.

Dorothy called out from the living room, "Anna Lee, Bobby—Betty Raye is here." All day Anna Lee had practiced smiling and looking happy for the arrival, but when the beat-up car pulled up, she secretly hoped nobody would see it.

The car door opened, and three people stumbled out, and just as Anna Lee had feared, the girl was wearing a light blue homemade dress with some sort of ugly green zigzag piping around the neck and sleeves. One of the Oatman boys untied a small brown cardboard suitcase from the running board and handed it to her.

Minnie was in the front seat by the window, waving her handkerchief. "Here she is, Mrs. Smith," she said, then looked up at the house and exclaimed, "Oh, just look at what a pretty place you got! This is probably the nicest house she's ever stayed at."

Dorothy thanked her. "Won't you and your family come in? I've made cookies for you."

"Oh no, honey, we can't. We just drove all the way from Oklahoma, packed in here like sardines, and we need to get where we're going. But we will take us a sack of them cookies if they're handy."

"Of course," Dorothy said. "Anna Lee, run in and put some wax paper around the cookies."

Minnie motioned for Dorothy to step over to the car and whispered, "Mrs. Smith, she won't eat much. The only trouble you might run into is that she's a-liable to sit in a corner and not talk, but don't take it personal. She's just real timid like, and I don't know why or where she gets it from. Lord knows none of the other Oatmans is one whit timid. We've been praying she'll get a healing, but no luck so far."

After they got the cookies, Minnie said, "I'll bring your plate back in the morning. We'll be here at nine sharp for your show," and they drove off, leaving Betty Raye standing on the sidewalk.

A little too brightly Anna Lee said, "Hi, I'm Anna Lee. Welcome."

Dorothy pulled her son over and said, "And this is Bobby."

Bobby said, "Hello."

Betty Raye looked down at the sidewalk and nodded. There was an awkward moment when they all just stood there, but Dorothy jumped in with, "Come on in and let's get you settled. Bobby, take her suitcase."

Bobby took it from her, immediately asking, "Hey, is this made out of cardboard?"

Dorothy shot him a look.

"I was just wondering," he said.

Betty Raye followed behind them, waiting to be told where to go. She said nothing until she was taken to Anna Lee's room. Dorothy opened the door and announced, "This will be your room."

The large, sunny room with the big white-lace canopy bed and the floral wallpaper looked like something out of a magazine. They all waited for her to go on in first, but Betty Raye did not move from the doorway. Then she looked up at Dorothy, almost cringing, and asked in an apologetic voice, "Mrs. Smith, do you have anywhere else I could stay?"

Dorothy was taken aback. "Don't you like this room? Is there anything wrong?"

"No, ma'am."

Dorothy was at a loss. All she could come up with was, "Oh dear." Then: "We can take a look around if you like."

Betty Raye whispered a scared little, "Would you mind?"

Thoroughly flustered, Dorothy said, "No, of course not. We want you to be happy."

All three of them followed Betty Raye from room to room like a small parade. She had almost gone through the entire house when she opened the door to the little sewing room off the sunporch. She looked in and pointed to the daybed against the wall, covered with scraps of material. "Can I stay here?"

Dorothy, crushed, said, "Why, yes, I suppose you can . . . but it's no bigger than a closet. Wouldn't you really feel better having a nice big bedroom with your own bathroom?"

But Betty Raye said, "No, ma'am. This will be fine."

Dorothy tried to be cheerful. "Well, all right. Anna Lee, help me get all this stuff off the bed, and let's fold up the ironing board."

That night at dinner Betty Raye hardly ate a thing. She spoke only when spoken to, and even that was minimal. Doc tried to chat with her. He asked pleasantly, "Betty Raye, how do you like your room?"

Bobby piped up, "She didn't like it. She's sleeping in the sewing room."

Doc looked at Dorothy. "Why is she sleeping in the sewing room? I thought she was going to stay in Anna Lee's."

There was a pause you could have driven a truck through as Dorothy tried to come up with a tactful answer.

Bobby, oblivious to the awkwardness of the moment, inquired, "If she doesn't want her dessert, can I have it?"

Later, before Dorothy joined them on the front porch, Mother Smith confided to Doc, "She's an odd little person, isn't she?"

THAT first night, Mother Smith thought Betty Raye was odd. But the next morning, after encountering the entire Oatman clan—

including mystery man Uncle Floyd Oatman and his Scripture-quoting ventriloquist's dummy, Chester, who wore a cowboy hat and sang "Jesus Put a Yodel in My Heart"—she realized Betty Raye was the best of the lot. After they left and Betty Raye went back to her room, Mother Smith whispered to Dorothy, "Good Lord, no wonder she's a little peculiar."

At exactly 9:15 a.m. they had all piled out of the car and banged into the house like an invading army, and they had eaten every one of the six dozen cookies in the entrance hall in less than ten seconds. During their segment on the show, Minnie took over Mother Smith's organ and almost pumped it to death. After the group had done three songs, Chester the dummy announced in his high squeaky voice, "Don't forget, folks, starting tonight we're gonna be at the Highway 78 Church of Christ annual tent revival all week. There's gonna be a whole lot of good singing, good eats, and soul saving, so come on out!" And then they all piled back into the car and left.

The living-room audience had thoroughly enjoyed their singing—particularly Beatrice Woods, the Little Blind Songbird, who had loved every song and had clapped her hands in delight when Chester the dummy yodeled. Mother Smith, not quite so enthralled, was glad to get her organ back in one piece. She turned to speak to Betty Raye, but the girl had disappeared. A second later the lock on her door clicked shut.

Betty Raye never came out of her room until it was time to go to the revival, and then she slipped out the front door without anyone hearing her and waited to be picked up by her family.

One afternoon Anna Lee had a Coke party for Betty Raye. The party was held in the little clubroom over at Cascade Plunge. Anna Lee had warned her friends in advance that Betty Raye's religion did not allow dancing, and so that was out. They all squawked, but they showed up anyway. The party was supposed to take place from three to five, but the family who drove Betty Raye out to the revival every night came and picked her up at four. It was just as well. They had all been on their best behavior, but the minute Betty Raye left, they ran to the jukebox and the jitterbugging began.

When Anna Lee came home, her mother was in the kitchen having a meeting with the local chapter of the Red Cross, discussing the upcoming annual drill. Anna Lee was returning some plates she had borrowed. Dorothy, who had been anxious all afternoon, asked, "How did the party go?"

Anna Lee made a face and motioned for her mother to come out on the back porch. Dorothy excused herself and closed the door. Anna Lee whispered, "Oh, Mother, it was just awful. Everybody tried their best to be nice, but all she did was stand over in a corner and shake."

"Oh no."

"She dropped an entire plate of food all over herself. I felt so sorry for her, I didn't know what to do. All the boys tried to talk to her, but she just doesn't know how to act. Do you think there's something wrong with her—that she's retarded or something?"

"No, of course not. She's probably not used to going to parties, that's all." But secretly Dorothy was concerned, and she wondered.

The next afternoon, after Betty Raye had been picked up, Anna Lee said, "I think she just hates me."

"She doesn't hate you, honey," Dorothy said.

"Well, she sure doesn't like me much. I invited her to come to my room so we could talk and try to get to know each other better, but all she did was sit there and act like I was holding her a prisoner." Anna Lee was sincerely baffled. "I don't understand it, Mother. Everybody else likes me. I was voted the most popular junior. And every time she sees Bobby, she turns around and goes the other way."

Mother Smith laughed and said, "That I can understand." Then she added, "It's like living with a little mouse in the house, isn't it? I hear her late at night scurrying into the bathroom, washing out her little things; then she scurries back to her room. She tiptoes around almost like she's apologizing for living. I think she would mash herself into the wall and just disappear if she could."

For the rest of the week Mother Smith and Anna Lee tried their best to make conversation, but without much luck. At the end of her visit, Dorothy and Princess Mary Margaret seemed to be the

only ones Betty Raye might have felt somewhat at ease with. She never came out of her room when the radio show was going on, but a few times in the afternoon, if no one else was around, she would slip into the kitchen and sit in the corner, petting the dog and watching Dorothy cook. Dorothy wanted to chat, but just let her be.

On Betty Raye's last morning there, Dorothy went into the little sewing room and sat down on the bed. "Sweetie, come over here and talk to me for a minute, will you?"

Betty Raye sat down.

Dorothy took her hand. "I know it's none of my business, but I'm worried about you. You know, you really mustn't be so afraid around people. We all like you very much, but if you won't talk to us, we don't know if you like us."

Betty Raye's cheeks turned red, and she looked down at her lap.

Dorothy continued. "I know it's because you are shy—and believe it or not, when I was your age, I felt the same way. But sweetheart, for your own good, you need to understand that you are a perfectly lovely girl, and people will always want to be your friend if you let them." Dorothy patted her hand. "I know you can do it. Will you promise me to at least try?"

Betty Raye nodded, big tears welling up in her eyes.

WHEN the Oatmans came to pick up Betty Raye, the Smiths all walked out to the car with her. Minnie leaned out the window and said to Dorothy, "I hope she weren't no trouble to you."

"Not at all. We loved having her."

"I told you she wouldn't eat much."

"Mrs. Oatman," Dorothy said, "could I trouble you to come inside for just a minute? I have something for you."

Minnie said, "Sure," and turned to her husband. "Turn the motor off, Ferris. You're burning up the gas." When they were inside the kitchen, she could see that Dorothy had prepared a huge basket of sandwiches and cookies for them to take on their trip. "Well, ain't this nice of you."

Dorothy closed the door and said, "The truth is, Mrs. Oatman,

I wanted to talk to you privately. Could we sit for just a second?"

"Sure, honey." Minnie sat down at the table. "And by the way, thank you for letting us advertise over the radio. We never had so many people to show up—they had to bring in a hundred more chairs and benches to fit them all in."

"You are certainly more than welcome."

"And thanks again for taking my little girl in."

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. I know this is none of my business, but are you aware that Betty Raye shakes?"

Minnie nodded. "Oh yes. She been doing that for I don't know how long, ever since she was five or six, I guess."

"Do you know why she shakes, Mrs. Oatman?"

"Call me Minnie, honey. No, I haven't an idea in the world. Maybe she's just too thin for her own good. She's got all them delicate little bones just like a bird." She laughed and held up her arm. "She sure don't take after me. Look, even my wrists are fat."

"Mrs. Oatman . . . Minnie . . . I know you know best, but considering Betty Raye's so shy, I just wonder if all this traveling could have something to do with it."

"You know, you might be right, Mrs. Smith." Minnie leaned forward and lowered her voice as she confided to Dorothy. "It pains me to say this, but I don't think gospel singing is in her blood, and I can't understand it. She's got gospel singing on both sides of the family. The boys couldn't wait to jump onstage, but Betty Raye . . ." She shook her head sadly. "She was always real different, and it's been hard on her." Minnie sighed. "I know she don't like traveling, and I know she hates singing, but what can I do?" Just then Ferris blew the horn, and Minnie got up. "Well, I better go. We got to be in Humboldt, Tennessee, by seven, but I sure appreciate you putting her up and all the nice food you made for us."

As they walked to the car, Dorothy said, "We'd be happy to have her back anytime, Mrs. Oatman." She looked in the car to say goodbye, but Betty Raye was already lost in the crowd in the back seat. Anna Lee and Bobby and Mother Smith stood and waved as they drove away.

As the car turned the corner, Dorothy felt a wave of sadness and had to fight back tears. There was something about the girl that touched her. She had given Betty Raye their address and asked her to write, but she wondered if she would ever see her or hear from her again. When they were out of sight, Dorothy put her arm around Anna Lee. "You were very sweet to her, and I appreciate it."

Bobby piped up, "I was sweet to her. I gave her one of my best rocks."

"Did you?" said Dorothy, and put her other arm around Bobby, which is what he wanted in the first place.

FOUR hours later and a hundred and seventy-eight miles from Elmwood Springs, the Oatmans were crossing over the Tennessee River. As usual, everyone in the car was talking at the same time. Betty Raye sat in the back with her eyes closed, holding on to the small rock Bobby had given her, and tried to shut the noise out.

What the Smith family did not know, and she had been unable to tell them, was that theirs was the nicest house she had ever stayed in. The reason she had not wanted Anna Lee's room was not because she did not like it. It was the most beautiful bedroom she had ever seen. The problem was its size. She was scared to stay in such a big room. And as far as not liking Anna Lee, nothing could have been further from the truth. She thought Anna Lee was wonderful and was in awe of her and her friends. And if she had not talked much, it was only because she could not think of anything to say. She had liked everyone she met, particularly Dorothy. On that last morning it had taken all her strength just to keep herself from begging them to let her stay. She had only been in Elmwood Springs for one week, but it had been the best week of her life.

THE Friday after Betty Raye left, Bobby's Cub Scout troop was supposed to have gone on a field trip to the Indian mounds outside of town to look for arrowheads. The trip was canceled because of rain, but Bobby did not mind. Monroe was spending the night, and right now they were in the backyard, lying in the damp grass, star-

ing up at the stars. Bobby said, "I wonder what it's going to be like when it gets to be the year 2000."

"I don't know, but I'll bet everybody will be riding around in their own spaceships, going back and forth to Mars."

"How old are we gonna be in the year 2000?"

Monroe sat up and counted on his fingers. He looked at Bobby incredulously. "We're going to be sixty-four years old!"

Bobby sat up. He could not believe it. "Nooo!"

"We probably won't even be alive, we'll be so old."

The prospect of being that old was sobering. After a while Bobby said, "Monroe, let's make a pact. If we're both alive in the year 2000, no matter where we are, we will call each other up and say, 'Hooray, we made it!' Okay?"

"Okay. Shake."

They shook hands and lay back down. They both wondered where they would be and what they would look like, but they could not even imagine it. To them the distance from this night, August 9, 1946, to the year 2000 seemed as far away as Elmwood Springs was to the moon.

Life Changes

OTHER than Mr. Peanut coming to town and the Elmwood Theater showing four Gene Autry movies in one day, nothing exciting happened, and before they knew it, September came rolling around.

As much as Bobby hated summer ending, there was something exciting about starting back to school. The boys had all gotten haircuts, the girls had new dresses, and everybody had brand-new shoes. The school had been slicked up as well, the wooden floors waxed to a high shine, the lunchroom scrubbed. Even the teachers, rested from summer vacations, looked optimistic and eager, ready to inspire the tender young minds that would be in their care for

the next nine months. This euphoria lasted about three days, and by the end of September it was the same old drudgery it had been the year before. Bobby was still the shortest boy in class, and Luther Griggs still threatened to beat him up every day.

Christmas came and went, and Bobby got a new maroon-and-white Schwinn bicycle and a Dick Tracy cap pistol. Plus lots of socks and underwear he did not want. He had been hoping for a genuine Jungle Jim pith helmet.

JANUARY and February were both fairly mild, and then March came roaring in. The first Monday of the month started off looking like it might be a nice day, but by eight o'clock in the morning things had changed drastically. Dorothy hardly had time to run around and get all her windows shut before the storm hit. By the time the show went on the air, the awning at the grocery store had been ripped off, and poor Tot Whooten had called, all upset because part of Merle and Verbena's roof had blown through her dining-room window and broken what was left of her good dishes.

Mother Smith opened the show with a few strains of "Stormy Weather," and Dorothy ran in and sat down and said, "That's right, Mother Smith. It is stormy weather, and looking out my window, I can tell you everything is a big mess. Oh, what a day. One minute the sun is shining, and the next, rain is blowing up and down the street every which a way. I didn't even have time to get my clothes off the line. After the thing hit, there wasn't a thing to do but wait it out. We all watched it from the bay window in the dining room, and I must say, we enjoyed it, even though we did see Doc's pajamas fly by. Storms always hit us on a washday, don't they? Mrs. Whatley over behind us just brought a couple of Doc's shirts back, but we lost everything else. Everybody in town has been calling, saying they have somebody else's clothes. Oh, I am so discombobulated this morning I can't find my format or anything."

She picked up her potted plant and put it down again. "For all of you at home, just thank your lucky stars you can't see me through the radio. I look like an old frump, and believe it or not, I am still

in my robe. Between the storm and so many calls, the time just got away from me. And today of all days. The very day we are announcing our brand-new sponsor, Cecil Figgs Mortuaries and Floral Designs, for all your floral and funeral needs, and here I sit with no face on, in my hair net, and still in my robe. I do apologize, Mr. Figgs, and I promise to do better tomorrow."

The rest of the year was fairly uneventful until one day in June, at 4:16 in the afternoon, when something major did happen.

BOBBY had been down at the drugstore since early that morning, working in the stockroom unloading boxes and stacking them in a pile outside the back door in the alley. He received an allowance of fifty cents a week, but he wanted to earn extra money so he could send off for the Charles Atlas bodybuilding course. He and Monroe had vowed to become musclemen before they went back to school next September. Considering that Bobby weighed sixty-eight pounds soaking wet and had arms like sticks, it was an ambitious goal. He had whipped through boxes of red-and-white straws, Band-Aids, and Whitman's Samplers in record time. He was in a hurry. Today was the day the swimming pool opened for the season.

Doc paid him his fifty cents, and Bobby ran home as fast as he could. Neighbor Dorothy had just told her radio listeners that unlike other prune juices on the market, Sunsweet prune juice was guaranteed by *Good Housekeeping* to have the same laxative potency in every glassful, when he came flying through the screen door, slamming it behind him, *wham,* on the way to his room. Neighbor Dorothy informed her listeners, "As you might have guessed, that was Bobby," and went on to announce that a Mrs. Aline Staggers of Arden, Oklahoma, was interested in locating a recipe for old-fashioned strawberry-and-rhubarb pie. At that moment Bobby came crashing down the hall carrying his bathing suit in one hand, but before he hit the front door, his mother said, "Hold it, young man!" and stopped him in his tracks. "Since you are making so much racket, why don't you come in here and tell everybody where it is you are going in such a hurry."

Bobby poked his head in the room and shouted, "Cascade Plunge opens today!"

Neighbor Dorothy said, "Oh, I see. Well, everybody, I guess we can say that summer is officially here. Bobby has just informed me that the pool is open."

Mother Smith hit a few chords of "By the Sea, by the Sea, by the Beautiful Sea."

Bobby knew the shortcut to everywhere in town through the back alleys, and he was at the pool in two minutes flat. He ran up to the big cement building with blue sky and white clouds painted over the sign that said CASCADE PLUNGE, dug in his jeans for a dime, and got his locker key and ran on in, practically pulling all his clothes off before he reached the men's changing room. He was in such a hurry that he almost tripped on his bright orange swim trunks. He quickly locked his locker and ran out from the shadowy dressing area into the shining white sunlight.

There it was. At last he had reached that oasis of shimmering, crystal-clear water he had been dreaming about all winter. He was far too excited to wait another minute, and he ran and flung himself into the pool. He swam underwater for a while and came up right beside Monroe, and they immediately began to splash water at each other while the girls around them who didn't want to get their hair wet screamed. Let the fun begin!

At about 4:30 that afternoon, when Bobby had not come home, Dorothy said to Anna Lee, who was in her bedroom with Patsy Marie working on their movie-star scrapbooks, "Anna Lee, I'm worried about Bobby. He's been down at that pool six hours. Would you and Patsy Marie take a walk over there and tell him to come home? He's had enough for one day."

Anna Lee groaned as if her mother had just told her that she had to build an Egyptian pyramid by hand, but she got up. "Come on, Patsy Marie, let's go. But I don't know why you let him go down there in the first place, Mother. All he does is swim around pinching people and acting like a jerk."

What she said was largely true. At that moment Bobby and

Monroe were swimming around underwater, pestering everyone they could. The best fun was to dive down and swim between unsuspecting people's legs and scare them to death. Bobby had just gone between one pair of legs when he suddenly realized they belonged to none other than Luther Griggs. Big mistake!

Bobby swam as fast and as far away from him as he could, but not far enough. As Bobby emerged at the surface, gasping for air, Luther, right behind him, rolled over on his back and kicked Bobby as hard as he could between his shoulder blades.

Bobby did not know what hit him. The powerful kick knocked the wind out of him and sent him flying toward the deep end of the pool. Luther swam away, laughing his head off, but Bobby did not come up. Having seen Bobby drift around underwater all day, nobody paid much attention to him, even the lifeguard, who had his hands full with a pool crammed with excited kids.

Some minutes later Macky Warren, who was standing around talking to Norma, looked over and noticed that Bobby was floating on top of the water facedown. He was not moving. Macky ran over to the side of the pool, reached in and jerked him up by his hair, and pulled him out. Bobby was unconscious and had already started turning blue. A few minutes later, when Anna Lee and Patsy came strolling into the pool area, they noticed a group of people gathered around something. Anna Lee did not think much about it until she got closer and realized it was a person on the ground.

Norma blurted out, "Oh, Anna Lee, I think he's dead!"

Anna Lee walked over, still not knowing who it was. Suddenly everyone moved aside. When she looked down and saw Bobby lying on the cement, she almost fainted. The lifeguard was giving him artificial respiration, desperately trying to get him to breathe. Unable to move, Anna Lee screamed over and over, "That's my brother!" In that minute before Bobby finally started to cough and spit up water, the thousands of irritating things he had ever done were forgotten. All Anna Lee wanted was for him to be alive.

When Bobby finally opened his eyes and saw so many people peering down at him, it scared him to death. He didn't know where

he was or what he was doing on the ground. He suddenly recognized his sister's face as she knelt down beside him. He was so happy to see her that he threw his arms around her neck and wouldn't let go.

Still in a state of shock, Bobby began to shiver and to cry. Anna Lee held him and said, "It's all right, Bobby. I'm here." Even when the lifeguard picked him up and carried him into the pool house and laid him down on the couch, Bobby would not let go of her hand. They covered him with a blanket and rubbed him all over to get his circulation back. After a while he sat up and had a Coke. When he felt well enough, Anna Lee got his clothes out of the locker and helped him dress, and they walked home together, his arm around her waist, her arm around his shoulder. As they got closer to the house, they saw their mother standing on the sidewalk.

"I've been worried to death," she said. "I was just about to go down there and find you. What were you doing all this time?"

Anna Lee squeezed his hand and said, "Nothing. I was just fooling around talking to some people, that's all. It's my fault."

The next day, Bobby decided it was in his own best interest not to go back to the pool anytime soon. Particularly as long as Luther Griggs was still lurking around. So he stayed in his room and read comic books. At about 12:30 that afternoon, Monroe came running through the side yard and knocked frantically on Bobby's window, his eyes wide open, as if he had just seen a Martian. "Let me in," he said. Bobby opened the window, and Monroe climbed across the sill, flush with excitement. "Whoa . . . wait till you hear what just happened to Luther!"

"What?"

Monroe walked around the room and exclaimed, "Fantastic! It was fantastic. You should have seen her. *Wham,* a right cross right on the chin, and then *bang,* she let him have it again with a left hook and then another right. Oh, she was great." Monroe danced around the room demonstrating the fight. *"Wham! Bam!"*

"Who?" asked Bobby.

"Anna Lee!"

Bobby couldn't believe it. "My *sister* Anna Lee?"

"Yeah."

"You're kidding."

"No, I'm not. I saw it. She came down to the pool a little while ago, looking for him, and she went over and jerked him up by his shirt and told him to pick on somebody his own size. Then she hauled off and knocked him flat on his back. When she got him on the ground, she just about kicked the stuffing out of him. He was crying and everything. You should have seen it." Monroe flopped back on the bed. "Boy, are you lucky. I wish I had a sister like that."

That night at dinner Bobby looked across the table at his sister with awe. Although nothing was said, their relationship changed. As Dorothy remarked later, "It's so pleasant not to have the children at each other's throats night and day. I wonder what happened."

ON JULY 1 Dorothy started her broadcast with an abandoned kitten in her lap. After her first commercial she announced, "By the way, the noise you are hearing is not a motorboat. It is the sweetest little cat I have here, just purring away, and he's in need of a home. He is a little orange angel, so if anybody can take him, please give us a call."

Norma's Aunt Elner, who never missed Dorothy's show, had a soft spot for animals as well, and the following morning Mother Smith started off the show with a rousing rendition of "Happy Days Are Here Again."

"That's right, Mother, it is a happy day. After the show yesterday, Elner Shimfissle called and said she would take the little cat, and yesterday afternoon she and her husband, Will, came to pick him up. So our little orange orphan has a nice home on a farm. This is the fifth cat she has taken this year, so thank you, Elner. People are just wonderful, aren't they? And now, to celebrate our big day . . ."

Mother Smith played a touch of "Happy Birthday" on the organ.

"Yes, it's our precious Princess Mary Margaret's birthday, and she thanks all of you out there in her fan club for her birthday cards . . . and we'll tell you more about that later. But first I want to remind you that every donation you send to the Princess Mary Margaret Fund helps pay for the care of animals that need our help. I am

happy to report that last year we found loving homes for over five hundred little dogs and cats, plus a box of painted turtles that had been abandoned. Plus funding for a Seeing Eye dog for our own Beatrice Wood. The dog came last week and is a beautiful golden retriever named Honey, and if you could see Beatrice and Honey walking up and down the streets, you would know what a wonderful cause your money went to. How can we ever thank you enough?

"I also wish you could see Princess Mary Margaret in her basket with all of her birthday toys. Our girl is twelve years old today. And here's a card I want to share with you. It says, 'Happy Birthday to Princess Mary Margaret. Mother, Bess, and Margaret send their best wishes. President Harry S. Truman.' "

Mother Smith played "Hail to the Chief" on the organ, and Neighbor Dorothy laughed.

THE phone rang at about two o'clock in the morning, and Doc figured it was just another call from someone who needed something. He often had to get out of bed at all hours and open up the drugstore for mothers who needed paregoric or cough medicine for sick children, or else it would be Tot Whooten calling to have Doc go find her mother, who had wandered off, or else help her get James off the lawn and into the house before the sun came up. But it was neither. It was Olla Warren telling him that his best friend, Glenn, who ran the hardware store, had just had a heart attack.

Doc was dressed and over at their house in less than five minutes, and Dorothy was right behind him. Young Dr. Halling was already there, and an ambulance was on the way. The next few days were touch and go, but Glenn finally came home from the hospital with a warning to take it easy for the next few months. So his son, Macky, would have to run the hardware store until Glenn got back on his feet. Bobby sort of hero-worshipped Macky, especially since he had pulled him out of the pool and saved his life. But Macky was someone all the younger boys looked up to. He was not only a movie usher but a top football and baseball player. Some said he was so good at shortstop he could play professional ball if he

wanted. Bobby felt bad about Macky's father being sick and Macky having to work all summer, but he did not know what to say.

Several nights later Doc was sitting in the parlor reading the paper when Bobby came in. He went over and spun the globe sitting on the desk a few times, and then he said, "Daddy, I need to talk to you." The seriousness of his tone made Doc wonder what trouble he had gotten himself into now. "You know that baseball we got at the World Series?" Bobby said.

"Yes."

"Well, I know you caught it and all, but would you be mad at me if I was to loan it to Macky Warren for a while? I remember he sure liked that ball when I showed it to him. What do you think?"

"It's your ball, son, and if that's what you want, it's fine with me."

"I'm not sure yet if I will or not. I just wanted to see if it would be all right if I did."

"I see." Doc didn't say anything more, but he was secretly pleased. It looked as if, despite Bobby's antics and craziness, underneath it all, he was turning out to be a really nice guy.

THAT summer, downtown Elmwood Springs got a brand-new fancy restaurant. The opening would be quite an event for Bobby. As far as he could remember since the day he was born, this would be the first time anything in town had ever changed.

The whole town was dying to know what kind of restaurant was coming, but that was the big mystery. People guessed at what it might be, but they all had to wait for the night of the grand opening, and what a surprise it turned out to be. Workmen had attached a long sign, covered in brown wrapping paper, to the front of the building. The paper was not to be taken off until the grand opening. Finally the big moment arrived. At exactly 8:30 the paper was removed, and everybody standing downtown that night waiting, including Bobby and the entire family, applauded when they saw the sign plugged in for the first time. A pink neon sign is something, but a pink neon sign in the shape of a pig that runs in a circle and blinks on and off set everyone wild. Oh, the wonder of it! A little

fat pink pig that circled around and around over a sign that read THREE LITTLE PIGS CAFETERIA—GOOD FOOD IN A HURRY was a sight that caused people to practically knock the door down trying to get in. Even if there had been no pink neon pig, just the word cafeteria was enough to stir up everyone for miles around. They had all heard of a café, a diner, even a sandwich shop, but an eating establishment called a cafeteria sounded so modern, so up to date and fashionable—urbane even. Bobby thought the whole idea of sliding your own brown plastic tray down a long line of clear glass trays filled with every kind of food you could think of—and all you had to do was point at what you wanted—was paradise. They had *every*thing: Jell-O squares with shredded carrots and green grapes inside, vegetables, meat, fish, rolls, corn sticks, and any kind of beverage or dessert you could want. They even offered foreign food—Italian spaghetti and Chinese chicken chow mein. Several women, after seeing all the varieties of food, vowed they would never fix dinner at home again, and three or four didn't.

Of course, it took a while for people to realize they had to watch what the kids chose. The first night, Bobby picked out three desserts and two bowls of mashed potatoes and gravy. But other than that, and a few people dropping their trays before they got to their tables, it was a welcome addition to the town.

SEPTEMBER rolled around again, and school started. Anna Lee was now a senior, with all the rights and privileges the name implies. But Bobby was still in sixth grade, and all he had to look forward to was Halloween. And after that, Christmas, which came and went with a hundred more socks, endless underwear, and, again, not one genuine Jungle Jim pith helmet. But there was snow on December 28. That was something, at least.

On New Year's Eve, James Whooten got drunk and fell down the back stairs of the V.F.W. hall and broke both his elbows and lost his job as a housepainter. To make ends meet, Tot started doing shampoos and sets in her kitchen. "Poor Tot, now she has to support the entire family," they all said, and everyone went to her to get their

hair done even if they did not need it. Tot had been to beauty school before she married, and she figured it was the only thing she was good at. Unfortunately, she was wrong. Mother Smith and a number of gray-haired ladies had come home from their appointments with bright purple hair, but they went back anyway. It was a small price to pay to help a friend.

AS THE time drew near for Anna Lee's graduation, seniors wondered who would be voted what in the Who's Who section of the yearbook. Norma and Macky were voted Cutest Couple, Patsy Marie tied with Mary Esther Lockett for Smartest Girl, and Anna Lee was Class Beauty. Graduation went off without a hitch. Dorothy and Doc gave Anna Lee a Lady Bulova watch, Mother Smith and Jimmy gave her money, and Bobby, following a suggestion from his mother, bought her a bottle of White Shoulders perfume with his paper route money. Two weeks after graduation Norma and Macky got married, and Anna Lee found herself in a melancholy mood. It dawned on her that life as she had known it for the past twelve years would never be the same. On the other hand, Bobby worried that his life would always be the same.

The first warm Sunday after school let out, he rode his bicycle out to the water tower, his pockets stuffed with red balloons and string, determined that today would be the time he would climb to the top and do the deed. Ever since he had climbed it with Monroe, he had been living with a terrible secret even Monroe did not know. He was scared to go back up. Not only that: Now he was scared of being scared. He had ridden out there at least a dozen times, determined to climb it, and each time, he had failed. Today, he vowed, would be different.

But it wasn't. It was just like all the other times. He put one foot on the ladder, his heart started to pound, and he could not go any farther. After trying for more than an hour, he gave up and rode back home, defeated. He began to fear the one thing in the world that terrified boys most. He was afraid that down deep he was a coward. Maybe Luther Griggs was right. Maybe he was a sissy.

A few nights later he had the same old dream. The one where he was climbing up the tower and the rungs of the ladder started to drop off one by one and he fell. Each time, he would wake up just before he hit the ground. He started to hate that water tower.

DOROTHY was in her kitchen doing a last-minute check of the show when she heard Mother Smith call her name. She looked up, and it was 9:28. Dorothy rushed down the hall with the papers, Princess Mary Margaret running behind her, barking frantically. "Here I am!" she said as she ran through the door at the last minute. She waved at the sizable audience in the room. "Hello. Sorry I'm late," she said as she sat down just as the red light came on and the theme music started.

"Good morning, everybody. It's another beautiful day over here, and I hope it's just as nice where you are . . . but first, before I say another word, if you are wondering why I sound a little funny, I want you to know that I have not been in the kitchen hitting on the cooking sherry."

Mother Smith played one bar of "How Dry I Am."

Dorothy laughed. "The reason I sound this way is I was up at Dr. Orr's this morning and got a filling, and the Novocain has not worn off yet, and so, with that disclaimer, on with the show.

"Independence Day is just around the corner, so three cheers for the red, white, and blue. Glenn Warren down at the V.F.W. post says that all the food they will be serving on the Fourth of July will be red, white, and blue—red beets, mashed potatoes, white-meat chicken only, blueberry pie with vanilla ice cream. Let's just hope the watermelons cooperate this year and turn bright red too.

"I hope you won't mind me bragging a little. We are so happy for Anna Lee, who has just been accepted at the Chicago School of Nursing, our own Nurse Ruby Robinson's alma mater, and I know she is as proud of Anna Lee as we are.

"How fast time goes by. It seems like the whole world is changing right before my eyes. Doc informed me last night that two new establishments are going up outside of town. One is a drive-in

Tastee-Freez in the shape of an igloo. The other is a new Howard Johnson's motel. Elmwood Springs is sure growing. And speaking of growth, I want to remind all of you in the Raymore and Harrisonville area that Cecil Figgs Mortuaries and Floral Designs has just opened two new branches close to you. And remember, Cecil Figgs is my only sponsor who really does not want your business but is always there when you need him."

THAT summer, Dorothy was reunited with the Oatman family. She was in Shenandoah, Iowa, the weekend after Independence Day to visit with her friend and fellow radio homemaker Evelyn Birkby and to participate in the big home-demonstration show at the Mayfair Auditorium.

As it turned out, the Oatmans were in Shenandoah too, for a fifteen-minute broadcast over station KMA. Dorothy had just given her "Decorating Cakes for All Occasions" talk when someone handed her a note:

> Dear Mrs. Smith,
> I seen a poster at KMA that you are here and so are we. I would love to talk with you after the show if you got the time.
> Minnie Oatman

Dorothy quickly wrote on the bottom, "Wonderful! Meet me at the stage door. Dorothy," and gave it back to the lady to deliver.

After the show, the two women walked across the street to a little café and sat in a booth that Minnie had trouble squeezing into. When they had caught up on all the places the Oatmans had been, Dorothy asked, "And how is Betty Raye?"

A look of concern crossed Minnie's face. She hesitated a moment and then confessed. "Not so good. To be honest, Mrs. Smith, that's what I wanted to talk to you about. She don't know I'm here, but you and your family was so sweet to her, and with you having your own daughter and all, I thought maybe you could give me some advice. I don't mind telling you I am just worried to tears over her."

"Oh dear. Is there anything wrong with her?"

"Not as of yet, but she's getting of an age to where all the boys is wanting to date her. She's hates traveling from place to place so bad, I'm afraid she'll marry one of them just to get herself off the road."

"Do you really think so?"

"If she's anything like me at that age, she will, and we don't have the money to hire another singer to take her place, so I'm at the bottom of my rope with worry." Minnie leaned over and confided to Dorothy, "Mrs. Smith, I know I'm not a very smart person. I've had little or none education. And don't get me wrong, I love 'em to death, but Ferris and the boys—and, God knows, Floyd—is not the brightest of men. This life is all right for folks like us, but Betty Raye's different. She's smarter than the rest of us. She thinks I don't notice, but I see her reading her books, wanting to learn things. Mrs. Smith, if I don't do something soon, she's gonna wind up just like me and stay dumb all her life."

An idea suddenly occurred to Dorothy about a possible replacement for Betty Raye, but she decided not to say anything specific yet. She asked Minnie to call her at home next week. Minnie said she would, and squeezed her way out of the booth.

All the way back home, Dorothy was torn. She wanted to help Betty Raye, but she would also hate to lose another girl she cared about. She also knew that same someone longed to travel.

Oh well, she rationalized, it couldn't do any harm to ask. The first day she was at home, she and Beatrice were sitting in the kitchen when she broached the subject. "Guess who I ran into up in Iowa?"

"I don't know."

"Do you remember the Oatmans?"

Beatrice smiled and petted her Seeing Eye dog, Honey. "Oh yes."

"And Betty Raye?"

She nodded "Yes . . . the girl who stayed here. How is she?"

Dorothy cleared her throat. "Not well, it seems. Her mother tells me that she is not really that happy traveling. She would like to stop for a while and maybe go back to school."

"Really?"

"Yes, but it doesn't look like that is going to happen."

"Why not?" asked Beatrice.

Dorothy had hoped she would ask. "Well, for her to stop singing, they would have to find someone to replace her in the group."

"Oh," said Beatrice. She began to pet Honey's head a little faster.

Dorothy stirred two more teaspoons of sugar into her coffee to give Beatrice time to think. "Of course, it would mean a great deal of traveling for someone—"

"Really?"

"You wouldn't be interested in anything like that, would you?"

Beatrice stood up. "Oh, Dorothy, do you think they would take me? Do you think they ever would? I know all the songs—"

"Well, Minnie is calling me in a few days, and if you want, I can certainly ask her. But now, I don't think it would pay much."

"I don't care about that. And if they're worried about me being blind, tell them about Honey. Tell them we get around fine. I can do almost anything. Tell them I'd sing for free."

They were both on pins and needles until Minnie called. Dorothy told her Beatrice would be available to go on the road in Betty Raye's place if they wanted her. Minnie said she would talk it over with Ferris and call back. An hour went by, and finally the phone rang again. "Mrs. Smith, you tell that girl if she is willing to put up with us, we would just love to have her. Hold on. I'm gonna put Betty Raye on the line."

While she was waiting, Dorothy called out to Beatrice, who was in the kitchen waiting to hear. "They want you, honey."

Then Betty Raye came on. "Hello?"

"Betty Raye . . . has your mother told you everything?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Is this all right with you? You know, we really want you to come."

"Mrs. Smith, you just don't *know* how much I want to be there." This was almost the first complete sentence Dorothy had ever heard Betty Raye say. As worried as Dorothy had been about doing the wrong thing, at that moment she knew she had done the right thing.

Minnie got back on. "Tell Beatrice we'll be over in a few weeks. I swear, just when you think there is no answer, the good Lord

sends you an angel. God bless you for a saint, Mrs. Smith. You don't know what a burden has been lifted from my heart."

Dorothy hung up and went to the kitchen, but Beatrice was gone. She was already next door in her room, starting to pack.

BETTY Raye had not changed much. She was a little taller and wore glasses now. Someone else had obviously picked them out for her. The frames were a bad combination of black plastic and metal rims. Dorothy vowed to herself that the first thing she was going to do was get the poor girl a new pair of glasses.

Even though they would miss Beatrice, everybody was glad that Betty Raye was coming back to stay with them. Especially Anna Lee. She had been moody all summer, worried about going away in the fall and leaving her family.

On the first night, Anna Lee went into Betty Raye's room and sat down and watched her unpack. She said sincerely, "You just don't know how grateful I am that you are here. I felt guilty about going so far away and leaving Mother all alone with just Bobby. But with you here she won't be so lonesome and worry about me so much."

Betty Raye, still shy around Anna Lee, mumbled, "Thank you."

Anna Lee went on. "You know, if you think about it, it's almost like you're a younger sister staying behind, isn't it? And as long as we are going to be like sisters . . . I wish you'd stay in my room when I leave. It would mean a lot to me if you did."

"Really?"

"Oh yes, and I know it would make Mother happy."

During the next few weeks Anna Lee spent a lot of time with Betty Raye. One afternoon she said to her, "I know you are real religious and all, but would it be a sin for you to go to the movies? Ginger Rogers is from Missouri, and I'm just dying to see *Kitty Foyle* again. It wouldn't hurt you to go just once, would it?"

Betty Raye thought a moment. "I don't know. I've never been."

The next night, Anna Lee her took to see *Kitty Foyle,* and Betty Raye loved it.

That Friday, Dorothy drove the two girls to Poplar Bluff to get

Betty Raye new glasses. Anna Lee picked them out. Blue plastic with wings on the end.

The day finally came when Anna Lee had to leave for nursing school. That night the whole family went to the train station to see her off. Dorothy tried her best to be brave, but at the last minute, when Anna Lee, looking so grown up in her brown hounds-tooth suit and hat to match, climbed on the train and turned around and waved, Dorothy broke down and sobbed. Doc put his arm around her. "Come on, now," he said. "She'll be back at Christmas."

Doc tried to pretend he was above such silly emotions as missing Anna Lee, but he wasn't. Anna Lee had been on the train about two hours when she found the envelope Doc had sneaked into her purse. Inside were a brand-new shiny nickel and a short note:

> If for any reason you don't like it up there, call me and I'll come and get you.
>
> Daddy

AFTER Anna Lee left for college, Dorothy was happy to be busy getting Betty Raye enrolled in high school. They had her tested, and to everyone's surprise she scored high enough to be a senior. It really was going to be like having Anna Lee back.

But poor Bobby was getting ready to slug through another year of sixth grade again. It had been quietly decided between his parents and his teacher, Miss Henderson, that since his grades last year had been so bad, particularly in math and English grammar, it would be best to hold him back a grade. Between having to repeat a grade and not being able to climb the water tower again this summer, Bobby was not very happy. Now the only thing he had to look forward to before the holidays came around again was a double feature each Saturday at the Elmwood Springs Theater.

When Betty Raye started her senior year at Elmwood Springs as the new girl in school, she had naturally attracted a lot of attention, but after the initial curiosity about her had worn off, she'd more or less faded into the background. Some of the girls tried their best to

bring her into the conversation at lunch or invite her to the drugstore for a soda, but she was so shy she never said much of anything. After a while they gave up. So Betty Raye did not go anywhere except to school and back and sometimes to a movie with the family, but that was really fine with her. She was happy just to come home, and Dorothy was glad to have her.

Everything seemed to be going along smoothly until one day in early November. Dorothy was at the A&P picking out some russet potatoes when Pauline Tuttle, the high school English teacher, a tall woman without much of a chin, came in the door. She spotted Dorothy and came right over and said in a loud voice, "I'm afraid we have a serious problem."

Dorothy was alarmed. "What is it?"

"It's Betty Raye. She does well with her paperwork, but it's in classroom participation where she falls down. She never raises her hand, and when I do call on her, she just mumbles and says she doesn't know the answer." Pauline picked up a potato and looked at it. "When I know full well she does. She just will not speak up. I hate to be the bearer of bad news, Dorothy, but that girl is never going to amount to anything if she does not learn to assert herself, and she certainly will not be making the grades she should be."

"We knew she was a little timid."

"Dangerously so, and if we don't nip this in the bud right now, her entire future may be at stake. She may be left behind forever."

"Oh dear. What can we do?"

"I was thinking she should join the Drama Club as soon as possible. Maybe Miss Hatcher can teach her to speak up." She picked up a head of lettuce, weighed it in her hand, and put it back down. "If you want me to talk to Betty Raye, I will."

"No, thank you. No. Let me see what I can do first."

Dorothy worried all the way home. This was a problem she had never come up against before. Certainly not with her own two children. With Bobby the exact opposite was true. His teachers had a problem trying to get him to stop talking. Pauline seemed to think it was an emergency. Maybe Pauline was right.

That afternoon, when Betty Raye was mashing potatoes, Dorothy broached the subject. "So how are you doing at school?"

"Fine."

"How are you doing making friends?"

"Fine."

"I don't know if you know this or not, but a good way to make friends is through extracurricular activities. You know, I ran into Pauline Tuttle today, and we were talking about you, and she—well, both of us were saying we thought it might be a good idea if you were to join a club of some kind. We thought maybe you might want to join the Drama Club. I know Anna Lee had lots of fun being in all the plays." She spoke brightly, but at the mere mention of the words Drama Club, Betty Raye turned pale.

She turned to Dorothy with a stricken look. "Oh, Mrs. Smith, I just couldn't."

Dorothy realized what a terrible idea this had been and immediately felt sorry for even bringing it up. She put her arm around Betty Raye. "No, of course you can't. I'm so sorry. How stupid can I be? You've been pushed up onstage all your life, haven't you?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Betty Raye, close to tears, "and I hated it."

"I know you did. I don't know what I was thinking of. And you don't ever have to do another thing you don't want to."

DECEMBER 21 was especially busy. Dorothy baked fifteen dozen gingerbread men to have at the house for the holidays, Bobby was pulling down all the Christmas decorations from the closets, and Betty Raye and Mother Smith made gumdrop trees out of toothpicks for the dining-room table. That night after dinner the whole family, including Betty Raye and Jimmy Head, walked down to the vacant lot behind the church, where the Civitan Club was holding its annual Christmas tree sale. The cold air was filled with the scent of pine, and Gene Autry was singing "Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer" on the small radio Merle had on in the shed as they walked through the lot looking at the different trees. Some were flocked in odd colors this year. At one point Doc heard Mother

Smith talking to Dorothy over in the next row. "Why would anyone in their right mind want a pink Christmas tree?"

"Oh, I suppose it's modern," said Dorothy.

"Well, there's modern and there's ugly, if you ask me."

Doc spied a large blue spruce, still wrapped in rope, lying on the ground. He pulled it up and was examining it when Fred Haygood, one of the Civitans, cut it loose for him. The tree was about eight feet tall and full and had a good shape. "What do you think, Jimmy?" Doc asked.

Jimmy nodded. "It looks good to me."

"How much?" asked Doc.

Fred called out to the shed, "Merle, how much for this blue spruce just came in?"

Merle called back, "Let him have it for a dollar fifty."

Doc said, "Have the boys bring it over and put it on the porch; we can get it in from there." They then headed down the street to Morgan Brothers department store to look at the Christmas display in the window. There was already a crowd enjoying the Winter Wonderland display, amazed by the hundreds of little mechanical figures all moving at the same time. Elves and Mr. and Mrs. Santa Claus, trains full of toys running up and down a white mountain. Reindeer with their heads bobbing, dogs wagging their tails, little figures of men, women, and children skating across a pond made out of a large round mirror. There was an entire world going on inside the window. Bobby would have stayed for hours with his face pressed to it if they had let him.

On the way home they passed the Civitan lot again just in time to meet Norma and Macky coming out with the pink Christmas tree. "Hi," Norma said cheerfully. "Look what we just got. Isn't it the cutest thing you have ever seen?" Mother Smith was speechless.

When they got home, everyone was tired and went straight to bed, and Bobby dreamed about the Christmas window. He was inside ice-skating on the mirror pond, twirling around with the pretty little girl in the red skirt and white skates. In his dream she looked a lot like Claudia Albetta, the girl who sat in front of him in class.

After school the next day, Betty Raye and Bobby started unwrapping the Christmas ornaments, and Doc came home with three new strings of glass candle lights that bubbled. He thought bubbling would look nice with the blinking lights they already had.

When Jimmy came in, he and Doc hung on the front door the splendid fresh holly Christmas wreath that one of Dorothy's sponsors, Cecil Figgs, had sent. After dinner they all went into the living room and started to decorate—all except Mother Smith. It was her job to sit on the sofa and point out what was needed and where.

The next morning at 8:54 Dixie Cahill led all sixteen of her dance students in full costume and makeup down the stairs of the Dixie Cahill School of Tap and Twirl and out onto the sidewalk. She lined them up single file, blew her whistle, and marched them through town and over to *The Neighbor Dorothy Show* to make their annual Christmas appearance. Since they were all wearing bells on their tap shoes, they made quite a racket. A few minutes later they marched up the porch stairs and into Neighbor Dorothy's house and lined up in the living room to wait until it was time for their number.

The house was packed with people. The handbell choir was lined up down the hall, waiting to go on after them, and Ernest Koonitz was smashed in a corner in the dining room, ready to be called for his annual tuba solo. Neighbor Dorothy, in a wonderful mood, came down the hall wearing her green Christmas dress and a silver-bells corsage. It was a doubly festive day for her. She loved doing her Christmas show, and Anna Lee was coming home that day. After Dorothy greeted everyone, she squeezed through the crowd and stepped over children who were sitting on the floor; then she sat down, gathered her commercials, and the show started with a big, "Good morning, everybody, and happy December twenty-third! We have so much fine entertainment I can hardly wait to get started . . ."

ANNA Lee arrived at the train station looking wonderful and full of news about all the new boyfriends she had. No surprise there. And of course Doc was happy to have the apple of his eye home, looking so beautiful on the platform. Dorothy couldn't wait to get

her home. She told Anna Lee that no matter how old or grown up they were, she just did not sleep well unless both her children were home in their own beds and she knew they were safe and sound.

That night, by the time Dorothy finished up in the kitchen, Doc was already in bed. She cleaned her face with cold cream and turned off the light and got in beside him. After a moment she said, "Doc, are you still awake?"

"Just barely."

"Hasn't this just been the loveliest day? Practically perfect?"

"Yes."

After another moment she said, "Doc, ask me what I would wish for if I could only have one wish come true."

He did not have to ask.

"He would have been twenty-six this year, Doc."

He reached over and patted her hand. "I know, honey."

No matter how many years had passed since their first son, Michael, died, every holiday had always been tinged with a secret sadness. For the first ten years, every Christmas morning the two of them had gone out to his grave and decorated it with a small tree and little toys, and every Easter an Easter basket had been placed there. Rarely did a day go by when one or the other did not think to themselves Michael would be six or twelve or whatever the age he would be that year.

Now twenty-two years had gone by. Dorothy wondered what kind of man he would have been. What young girl would have loved him and maybe even married him by now? What would his children have been like? Although he had been gone for many years, a picture of him as a child was always alive in Dorothy's mind. She continued to see him standing there and waving at her, the little boy who did not live. She often thought about the bud that never bloomed, the egg that never hatched, and wondered what happened to them. Did they just disappear, never to exist, lost forever? Or would they come back again some spring? For years she looked for her little boy in every small child she saw. But she never found him again.

ON THE MORNING OF December 24 Bobby could hardly wait for the night to come. It was a long wait. Once Dorothy had seen a newsreel of Joan Crawford, her favorite movie star, and her children gathered around a piano singing carols on Christmas Eve, they had to do the same thing. Now, every year after dinner, she made the whole family go in and gather around the organ and sing. Bobby hated the custom with a passion. As far as he was concerned, it just delayed the real meaning of Christmas: presents. At around 9:30 that night, when they finally sat down to open them, the phone rang. Before picking up the phone, Dorothy said, "Wait a minute. Let me see who this is. Don't open anything yet."

They could hear Dorothy saying to someone on the phone, "Oh no. . . . Oh, you poor thing. Oh . . . well, bless your heart. Yes, I'm sure he will. . . . Oh, you poor dear." She came back in and looked at Doc. "That was poor Tot. Her mother stole all the presents she had wrapped and hid them in the backyard, and now she can't find them, and she wondered if you would go down and open up the drugstore for her so she could get a few things for the kids to have in the morning. I told her you would."

"All right," said Doc, and he got up to get his coat. "You all go ahead and open the presents. I'll be back in a little while."

Dorothy said, "We will do no such thing. We are not going to open anything until you get back."

Bobby asked his mother, "Can't we open just one?"

"No, Bobby. Put that back down."

Mother Smith sighed. "Poor Tot, to have to work all day and then have to put up with that crazy mother of hers and try to raise those two children at the same time. I don't know how she puts up with it all myself."

"I don't either, and to make matters worse," Dorothy said, "James fell into the Christmas tree and broke everything again."

It was an hour later by the time Doc got back home, and finally Bobby was able to rip open the big box from his parents. Inside was a great record player, and his grandmother gave him the two records he wanted most, "Mule Train" and "Ghost Riders in the Sky."

And underwear.

He received money from Jimmy, a Rover Boy book from Betty Raye, and Anna Lee surprised him with a genuine Jungle Jim pith helmet.

As usual, Dorothy was the last one up that night, and when she finished doing a few final things in the kitchen, she went into the living room to turn off all the Christmas lights. She stood there for a moment and looked at them blinking and bubbling in the dark, and they looked so pretty she decided to leave them on all night.

THE time between Christmas and May seemed to fly by for everyone except Bobby. To him four months felt like ten years, and by the end of the school year he was like a wild animal ready to be let out of his cage. Dorothy did manage to get him into his good suit and a bow tie for Betty Raye's high school graduation. Dorothy wanted to be sure that everybody made a big fuss over her that day. The entire family was there, applauding loudly when her name was announced. Dorothy was worried about her not being as popular as some of the other students, and since the Oatmans could not be there, Dorothy wanted her to know she had people who cared about her. After graduation there was a big senior party at Cascade Plunge, but Betty Raye said she didn't want to go.

Dorothy hated the idea that Betty Raye was not going. She had not gone to the senior prom either. One boy had asked her, but she'd told him she could not dance, so he'd asked someone else. On prom night she'd stayed home and worked on her scrapbook. She seemed not to mind, but all night Dorothy had felt terrible about it—and now the girl was missing the big senior party as well.

Later Dorothy told Mother Smith, "I feel so sorry for her. I just don't know what to do."

"Why? Did she say something about her parents not being here?"

Dorothy shook her head. "No, it's not that. It's just when I went in her room earlier, she was sitting all by herself working on her scrapbook while everybody else is out having fun."

"Maybe she enjoys working on her scrapbook."

"Do you know what she puts in it? Pictures of houses that she cuts out of magazines."

"Houses . . . Why houses?"

"Because she says that's what she wants more than anything."

"Movie stars I can understand, but houses, that's a new one. What kind of houses?"

"Just little houses. She must have over a hundred pictures pasted in there."

"Is that why you feel sorry for her?"

"No. I just get the feeling she's always sad about something. Not on the surface, but deep down inside of her." Dorothy looked away, and her eyes filled with tears.

DOROTHY was right. Betty Raye was sad. And she had felt lost all of her life, but she did not know why. She also felt guilty for not being like the rest of the Oatmans and the Varners and for being such a disappointment to them—for not being outgoing and a good singer like the rest of them. She loved her family, but there were times when she felt as if she had just been dropped down from another planet into a group of strangers.

She did not know it, but there was a perfectly good reason she felt so different. She *was* different. In fact, she was not even remotely related to them.

In the last month of Minnie's pregnancy, she and Ferris and the boys were living in Sand Mountain with Ferris's mother and daddy, and when it was time for the baby to be born, they all piled into the car and drove to Birmingham and checked Minnie into Hillman Hospital, where on November 9, 1931, three babies were born not more than thirty minutes apart. A little boy named Jesse Bates, a little girl named Carolina Lee Sizemore, and Betty Raye. It was unusually busy on the fourth floor, and it didn't help matters that the entire Oatman and Varner clans descended on the maternity ward, including Floyd and his dummy Chester. Was it any wonder Nurse Ethylene Buck was all atwitter? This was only her second week in the maternity ward. And she had just been handed three

babies at once, and she had to weigh them and get them ready to see their mothers. Not only that—there was a man standing at the window with a dummy shooting his eyebrows up and down at her, saying, "Whoo, whoo, whoo." Nurse Buck became so flustered she put the Sizemore baby's name bracelet on the Oatman baby and the Oatman baby's name bracelet on the Sizemore baby.

When Mrs. Kathrine Sizemore, the lovely blond wife of a prominent Montgomery attorney, was handed her baby, she was surprised to see that her hair was so dark. Just as Minnie had been surprised that her baby had such light hair. She remarked to Ferris, "She's a pale little thing, ain't she? And just look at them tiny little ears!"

But fate is fate. Eighteen years later, while Carolina, a large-boned girl with coal-black hair, was desperately trying to stuff herself into a white evening gown to prepare for her debut at the Montgomery Country Club, Betty Raye, who should have been there, was applying for a job as a vegetable girl at the Three Little Pigs cafeteria.

Anna Lee stayed in Chicago that summer to do her student nursing, and Bobby spent most of his time reading Zane Gray cowboy novels. He was so caught up in reading about the romance of the Old West that by June he had finished them all, from *The Riders of the Purple Sage* to *The Thundering Herd.* After that he was bored. Other than the time he and Monroe got caught in his father's den going through *National Geographic* magazines looking for pictures of native women with their tops off, the summer was turning out to be uneventful. But fate can turn on a dime, and one event can change a child's life forever. If not forever, it can certainly change the way they view themselves in the world, good or bad. For Bobby that day was here.

Jimmy Head got up as usual at 4:30, lit his first cigarette, made the coffee, put on his white shirt and pants and black leather bow tie, and was down at the Trolley Car Diner at 5:00. Jimmy didn't know it yet, but he would be the first one in the Smith household to find out what was happening that day. This morning he went about his business as usual. He had great pride in his diner and kept it spotless. Every morning the black-and-white tile floor was scrubbed

sparkling clean. The silver chrome on the counters and on the base of all the round red leather stools was polished and kept as shiny as a new car in a showroom.

Jimmy had learned to cook in the navy and was a short-order cook of the first order. He could fry eggs any way you wanted and make a grilled cheese sandwich to perfection, golden brown. At exactly one minute to six he put on a clean apron and his white paper hat with the red stripe, and opened the door for business. To his surprise, there stood Bobby.

"Hey. What are you doing downtown so early?"

Bobby said, "Couldn't sleep. I figured I'd come down and have a cup of coffee with you. You know, the bubble gum contest is today."

"Oh, that's right. Well, come on in."

Jimmy knew Dorothy did not let him drink coffee, but he figured a little wouldn't hurt him. Bobby climbed up on a stool, and Jimmy put out a cup and saucer and poured him a half cup. Bobby happily added four teaspoons of sugar.

"Do you want something to eat?" Jimmy asked.

"No, I think I better not." Bobby added another spoonful of sugar. "You know, the secret is breath control. I ran out of breath right at the end last time, or I would have won."

"I see. So what's your strategy this year?"

Bobby took a sip of coffee. "I've been trying to build up my breath control, holding my head underwater in the tub. But other than that, I don't know what to do. I was hoping you might have some advice."

"Have you practiced any yet this morning?"

"Not yet. I thought I'd get in a couple of hours before nine."

Jimmy opened a large can of chili and thought carefully before he spoke. "Well, here's my advice. You can take it or leave it, but if I were you, I wouldn't practice at all this morning."

"Not at all?"

"I wouldn't. You can figure everybody else will, right?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"So if you walk in nice and rested, you have an advantage. See what I mean?"

Bobby's eyes widened. "Yeah . . . I see!"

"Save your energy for the big push—when you need it. And when you're up there, concentrate. Remain calm and steady as she goes. Don't look right; don't look left; don't let yourself get rattled. Just stay the course, nice and easy all the way."

Bobby listened intently. "Yeah. Don't get rattled. Nice and easy."

"What's the prize on this thing?"

"Twenty-five free passes to the theater."

Jimmy was impressed, or acted as if he was. "Hey, that's a good deal." Just then two of Jimmy's breakfast regulars came in. "Morning, boys," he said.

Bobby finished his coffee and ran out the door. "Thanks, Jimmy."

"Good luck, buddy."

At exactly 9:00 a.m. a dozen boys, most at least two inches taller than Bobby, stood in a straight line on the stage of the Elmwood Springs Theater. Ward McIntire, the man from the Bazooka bubble gum company, held a glass bowl filled with gum all wrapped in shiny waxed paper. As he stood there, Bobby kept repeating in his mind, Don't get rattled. Don't look right; don't look left. After everyone had a piece of gum, Mr. McIntire walked up to the microphone and announced in a booming voice, "Gentlemen, unwrap your gum." Bobby's hands were sweaty as he struggled to unwrap the paper and get his gum out. He waited for the next signal. Mr. McIntire looked at his stopwatch, then said, "Get ready . . . begin!" In unison twelve boys jammed the gum into their mouths and began chewing. Bobby forced himself to remain calm. He knew that part of the secret of a good bubble is not to start blowing until all the gum has been chewed properly. Timing was everything. Wait! Wait! he repeated in his head. Don't get rattled. He could hear that some of the boys had already started blowing, but he waited until the moment he felt was just right. Bobby started to blow, slowly at first; then, as the bubble grew larger, he increased his breathing, deeper each time, until his shoulders were heaving up and down with each breath. All around him bubbles were popping, but Bobby kept going until he was the only one left. But he didn't know it. He

was alone on the stage, looking at the world through the soft pink gauze of a now vast bubble that was growing still larger. The audience held its breath. Would the bubble ever pop? But it kept growing until Bobby felt like he might float up in the air. Then it happened. He heard an amazingly soft, slow pop, and there he stood with bubble gum covering his face, his ears, and the top of his head.

"The winner!" screamed Ward McIntire, and the audience was on its feet applauding. What glory. Five minutes later Bobby ran into the Trolley Car Diner with gum still sticking to his eyelashes and ears, waving his free-pass book, yelling, *"Jimmy . . . I won. I didn't get rattled. I won!"* Before Jimmy had a chance to congratulate him, he was out the door, headed for the drugstore to tell his father. When he got home, his mother had to use kerosene to get all the gum out of his hair. He used up all twenty-five passes in less than a week taking everybody to the movies, but he didn't care. He had blown the biggest bubble in the history of the contest, people said. From that day on, he felt special. He was a man of destiny after all.

AS BOBBY found out, sometimes in life you just get lucky and hit the right combination. After years of trying, one day you press the lever of the slot machine, all three cherries line up in the right order, and you've hit the jackpot. Such was the case the day Beatrice Woods joined the Oatman Family Gospel Singers.

They had been together for only a few months when a producer from Hallelujah Records heard them sing in Atlanta. After they cut their first album, things started to happen. When *Can't Wait to Get to Heaven* climbed to the top of the gospel charts, offers started coming in from everywhere. This combined with their appearance on the Arthur Godfrey show, and they suddenly became the number one gospel group in the country. To Beatrice's delight, the sudden popularity meant traveling to almost every state in the union, and within six months they had even sung in the White House. By the end of 1949 they were booked fifty-two weeks of the year and had their own silver bus with THE OATMAN FAMILY GOSPEL SINGERS written in bold black letters on both sides.

Betty Raye was very happy for their success and equally as happy that she was not involved in it. As far as she was concerned, her life was perfect. Quiet and peaceful. She did not have to be onstage performing every night and then have to pack up and drive somewhere else. She got to sleep in the same bed in the same town week after glorious week. She had a nice little job she liked, all the books she could read, and she went bowling once a week. For the first time in her life she was able to do the same old thing, and she loved it. At last she was beginning to feel as if she really belonged somewhere. She wanted it to go on forever. But one day Hamm Sparks walked in the door.

HAMM Sparks was an ordinary young man in most respects. Ordinary except for the one thing: ambition. He burned with it. He thrived on it. And he had a plan. At the moment it involved going to college on the GI Bill, waiting on tables in the dorm six hours a day, and selling Allis-Chalmers tractors on the weekends and during summers to help support his mother and two younger sisters. He was not afraid of work. In America, no matter how poor you started out, you could go as high as you wanted if you were willing to work for it. This gave Hamm hope for a bright and shining future, and he was on his way. He did not know exactly where yet. All he knew was that he was in a hurry. He ate fast, talked fast, walked fast, and hardly ever slept. He shook hands, patted backs, and never missed an opportunity to introduce himself to everyone he ran across.

What brought him to Elmwood Springs was Bess Goodnight. In 1942 he had passed through town on a train headed to Fort Leonard Wood and, like a lot of the other soldiers, had thrown his name out the window, hoping to get someone to write to him. Bess Goodnight wrote to him throughout the war. Like many of her wartime pen pals, Hamm came to visit her whenever he was near Elmwood Springs. He got a big kick out of Bess and loved to take her to the Three Little Pigs Cafeteria for lunch. Hamm loved the idea of good food in a hurry, but this Saturday, while going through the line, he slowed a bit when he noticed a pretty girl in glasses

waiting for him to tell her what vegetables he wanted. Usually he passed right by the vegetables, but today he stopped. "Ah . . . let's see." He pointed to something green. "Are those turnip greens?"

"No, sir. Collard greens."

"All right, good. Give me some of those." Even before they got to the table, he asked Bess about the girl dishing out the vegetables.

Bess glanced over and said, "Oh, that's Betty Raye, Dorothy's boarder. Ever hear of the Oatman family?"

"Yeah," he said. "I hear them on the radio."

"That's their daughter. She used to sing with them, but she quit."

Hamm glanced back over at Betty Raye, even more impressed. "Well, I'll be. She's not married yet?"

"No."

"Is she going with somebody?"

"Not that I know of."

"Do you reckon she'd go out with me?"

Bess laughed. "You sure don't waste any time, do you, boy?"

During the next four weekends Hamm never drove so far or ate so many vegetables in his life. Every Saturday when he came down the line, Betty Raye was horrified at all the commotion he would cause. She asked him to please stop holding up the line, but each time, he said, "I will, just as soon as you say yes." One Saturday, after he had been down the line for the fourth time, he pleaded with her. "Come on now, Betty Raye, you've just got to go out with me. If I eat one more bowl of collards, I'm liable to turn green. You don't want that on your conscience, do you?"

Well, what could she do? Hamm was a force hard to resist.

MONDAY was Betty Raye's day off, and Hamm picked her up in the afternoon to take her to Poplar Bluff for dinner. She had never been on a real date. She had no idea how she was supposed to act. She did not know it, but he had not been on many dates himself. He had been too busy working and had not had the money to take girls out. All through dinner she did not talk much. Luckily, she did not have to; he talked enough for both of them. This was the first

time Hamm had seen her in anything but a white uniform and cap, and he was impressed. She wasn't exactly pretty in a conventional way, but there was something so sweet and shy about her that as the night wore on, the prettier she became.

After that first date Betty Raye heard no more from him. A month went by, and she had more or less forgotten about Hamm Sparks, but that thought had never occurred to him. It had not taken him long to make up his mind. He had known after that first date that he wanted to marry her, so why wait? He was almost twenty-seven, in a hurry to get married and get started on his career, so the next day he got busy making plans for both of them. The first thing he had to do was get the money. The next day he talked the district manager of Allis-Chalmers into letting him sell in three more areas. It took him almost a month, working nights and weekends, but he finally earned enough money to make a down payment. Then one Friday, Hamm put on his brand-new blue suit from Sears and drove over to Elmwood Springs with the box in his pocket. He had not bothered to inform Betty Raye he was coming, because he wanted to surprise her.

He walked up the steps to the house and knocked. Dorothy came to see who was there.

"Hello, Mrs. Smith. Is Betty Raye here?"

"Well, hello, Hamm." Dorothy opened the door. "Yes, she is. Come on in. We are just sitting down for supper; why don't you come back and join us."

"Thank you, I think I will, if it's all right."

"Of course it is. All I have to do is set a plate. You just go on in the dining room and sit down." She called down the hall as she went to the kitchen, "Betty Raye, everybody, Hamm is here."

After dinner he and Betty Raye sat alone on the porch. Hamm handed her a little box. "Open it," he said.

She asked, "What is it?"

"Open it. I bought you a ring."

She was puzzled. "Why?"

"Because I want you to marry me."

She was not sure what she had heard. "What?" she said again.

"Will you marry me?"

"Me?"

"Yes, you. What do you say?"

She was so flustered she didn't know what to do, so she handed the box back and said, "Oh, thank you, but I can't. I have a job. I'm sorry. I have to go in." And she stumbled through the screen door.

This was not exactly how Hamm had envisioned the evening. But he did not give up. He showed up at the cafeteria every free moment he had and went down the line singing out, "Aw, come on, honey, say you will. I'm coming back every night until you say yes."

This went on for weeks. Doc said, "I'd hate to have that boy chasing after me. Hell, at this point *I'll* marry him, and he hasn't even asked me."

Hamm was like a small tornado, and Betty Raye got caught up in the whirlwind. She was at first curious and then dazzled by him. He drove her home from work one night and parked the car in front of the house. "Now, Betty Raye, you can't go in until I get just one little kiss. You don't want to break my heart, do you?"

After one, and then more than one, she walked into the house in a daze and said to Dorothy, "I think I might be engaged."

The next thing Betty Raye knew, Hamm had tracked down the Oatmans, who were performing in Charlotte, North Carolina, and the two of them, along with Ada and Bess Goodnight as chaperones, drove all night to get her parents' blessing.

In Charlotte, Minnie took Betty Raye on their new bus and shut the door so they could be alone. Minnie sat her down and said, "He seems like a fine young Christian man, and I only have one question."

"Yes, ma'am?"

Minnie took her hand and looked her right in the eyes. "Do you love him, honey?"

This was a question Betty Raye had hardly had time to think about. What had seemed important up to now was how much he loved her. She looked out the window at Hamm standing in the middle of a group, talking away, smiling and shaking hands. Seeing

I'd live to see the day when I would have one so close to home."

Mother Smith played two bars of "Here Comes the Bride."

"That's right, Mother. Last night Anna Lee called home and told us all the good news. It's official. She's engaged to that nice boy I've been telling you about. We are so excited for our girl. She and William will be married next June, right after she finishes her nurse's training. And I am not the only mother in Elmwood Springs that has good news."

Mother Smith hit a few cords of "My Blue Heaven."

"Right, Mother . . . and baby makes three. Ida Jenkins informs me that she expects to be a grandmother before the year is up, so congratulations to Norma and Macky.

"Oh, we have all sorts of good things planned for you today, but first—did you know that nine out of ten screen stars use Lux soap? 'I'm a Lux girl,' says beautiful movie star Linda Darnell. So if you want clear, glamorous skin tomorrow, use Lux today."

And as if Bobby's having become the Bubble Gum King and the news of Anna Lee's engagement were not enough good Smith news for one year, something else wonderful was about to happen. On a beautiful Sunday morning Old Man Henderson went out in his yard with his pair of World War I binoculars. He had spotted something odd a few minutes before. When he focused them, he mumbled to himself, "Some goldarned fool has gone and tied red balloons all over the top of the water tower."

The Fifties

THE '50s brought many changes in Elmwood Springs and all over America. Everywhere you looked, TV antennas seemed to pop up overnight. Names like Uncle Miltie and Howdy Doody were now part of the language. But TV sets were not the only things multiplying. Babies were being born every minute of the night and day.

him there, not knowing anybody and trying so hard to give her family a good impression, touched her so that suddenly a tremendous wave of affection for him swept over her. That moment she felt her heart go right out to him. She looked at Minnie and answered, "Yes, Mother. Very much."

Minnie squeezed her hand, then pushed something that made a hissing sound, and the bus doors flew open and she called out in a loud voice, *"Praise the Lord, Ferris. Our baby is getting married!"*

When they came back, the travelers told everybody the news. They were going to drive up to Poplar Bluff and be married by a justice of the peace the very next day.

The next afternoon, when Betty Raye said, "I do," she meant it. She had no idea how this all had happened or why, but the new Mrs. Hamm Sparks found that she was hopelessly in love with her new husband.

Two weeks later Dorothy walked into the house with a big smile on her face and handed Mother Smith the postcard from the Blue Haven Motor Court outside Centralia, Missouri.

Dorothy said, "I know we both had our doubts for a moment, but it looks like everything is going to work out. Written on the back of the card was:

Dear Smith family,
I am so happy! Thank you for everything.
Love,
Betty Raye

IT SEEMED as if the summer was to be a lucky one for everybody. On the morning of August 20 Dorothy came fluttering down the hall like a great butterfly. She was elated over the news she had just received, and she could hardly wait to get on the air and tell all her listeners. The red light went on just as she sat down.

"Good morning, everybody. It's a beautiful day here in Elmwood Springs, and I hope it's just as pretty where you are. You know, over the years I have announced so many weddings, and I never thought

Norma and Macky Warren now had a little girl named Linda, and Anna Lee had a child on the way, and this morning, April 7, Dorothy had yet another birth to announce. She came down the hall as usual, greeted her guests, and the show started. "Good morning, everybody. It's another pretty day over here . . ." Then, "Flash, as Walter Winchell would say. Attention, Mr. and Mrs. America and all the ships at sea. Last night our little friend Betty Raye over in Sedalia, Missouri, gave birth to seven-pound little Hamm Sparks, Jr. So a great big welcome to the world, baby boy!"

Bess Goodnight, who worked at the Western Union office, walked up on the porch and handed Dorothy something that had just come in over the wire. "Thank you, Bess," Dorothy said as she scanned the news item. "Ooh. A fanfare, if you please, Mother Smith. Our own sponsor, Mr. Cecil Figgs of Cecil Figgs Mortuaries and Floral Designs, has been named Missouri Businessman of the Year for the second time in a row. So another great big congratulations to you! We always love it when our advertisers do well."

IF THERE was ever a business that proved advertising paid off, it was Cecil Figgs Mortuaries and Floral Designs. What had started out as one small pink concrete-block building was now thirty-six large white-columned affairs (designed to resemble Tara in *Gone with the Wind*) scattered across the state, two in Kansas City alone. By now Cecil Figgs was the biggest name in the funeral and floral business. He was advertised statewide, on the radio, on billboards, on bus stop benches, in newspapers and the yellow pages.

After Cecil had been named Businessman of the Year for the second time, Helen Reid, a woman with the local newspaper, arranged an interview with his aunt, who still lived in the small town of Eudora, Missouri, where he'd been born. Mrs. Mozelle Hemmit sat in her parlor and recalled his childhood for the reporter. "Cecil always loved a funeral. From the time he was six years old, you'd bring him a dead cat and you had yourself a funeral. I remember when he first started out. Cecil was a one-man band as far as the funeral business. He did the flowers, embalmed the departed,

preached the sermon. And if that wasn't enough, he drove the hearse. But he's come a long way from those days. I know Ursa is proud of him. He's been a good son. How many boys would bring their mother to live with them and be so sweet?" Mozelle shook her head, puzzled. "A sweet boy like that, but he never married, and I don't know why. He was always real popular."

"What is the secret of his success?" the reporter asked.

"I would say it's his love of pageantry—and knowing people. He told me one time, 'Aunt Mo,' he said, 'people need a little help to cry over their departed.' And believe me, he knows how to tug at your heartstrings. I'll guarantee you will not go to one of Cecil's funerals and not wind up crying."

True enough. When Ferris Oatman died suddenly in 1952 of a massive stroke, Cecil Figgs was the first one called. Although it was seventy-five miles from Ferris's hometown, Cecil decided the service was to be held at the old Boutwell Auditorium in Birmingham, where the Oatmans had sung at so many sacred-music festivals. On the day of the funeral every gospel group in America showed up to pay their respects. Ferris's large white casket was covered in a spray of white carnations, with musical notes shaped out of little black pipestems that Cecil had personally designed. As a tribute, Beatrice Woods, backed up by a stage full of twenty-six gospel groups, sang "There Will Be Peace in the Valley." By the time it was over, Minnie was so torn apart she had to be put in a wheelchair and rolled out of the auditorium.

Hamm had driven Betty Raye to her father's funeral, and he used this opportunity to shake hands and introduce himself to as many people as he could. Before the service, while working the crowd, Hamm had watched the governor out of the corner of his eye. He had never been this close to a governor. He noticed with fascination how the man's staff jumped when he said jump, and how the auditorium hung on his every word as he delivered his short eulogy. Before the day was over, two momentous things had happened.

1. Hamm had discovered what office he wanted to run for.
2. Hamm had met Cecil Figgs.

AFTER FERRIS'S FUNERAL Minnie announced, "I can't go on without Ferris. Music is left my heart. I've come home to die."

There was great speculation in the gospel world. Was the death of Ferris the end of the Oatmans? But help was on the way in a six-foot five-inch package called Emmett Crimpler. He arrived one day and said, "Minnie, I'm available to sing with you if you want me."

Minnie sat up in her bed. She wanted him. Emmett Crimpler was considered one of the great basses in gospel music. He told Minnie he had had a dream where Ferris had come to him and told him to leave the group he was with and to go over and take his place. Emmett did not mention that he had wanted to leave the Harmony Boys for over a year, but it did not matter. His arrival was a miracle. The Oatmans were on the road once more!

HAMM Sparks was not particularly good-looking, not very tall, only about five feet nine, and of average build. He had brown hair and dark brown eyes. But he had something more. He had charm, and he did not even know it. The most seductive thing about Hamm, which made his overt, raw ambition oddly charming, was that he meant what he said. There was not a phony bone in his body. He believed he was the one to fight for the average person, for those being pushed around. He was nice, but tough and single-minded, and he came from a long line of proud people.

Years ago, when the Tennessee Valley Authority had wanted to take over his family's land and build a dam to supply electricity for the entire region, his father had fought them as hard as he could. But to no avail. In the end the TVA flooded the entire area, and nothing of theirs was left. His father had told him over and over, "Son, if the federal government can steal one man's land and get away with it, democracy is in danger of failing." This one event forged Hamm into a fierce defender of individual rights.

After he and Betty Raye married, the urge to go into politics became so great he quit his job at Allis-Chalmers and ran for Pettis County commissioner of agriculture.

Even though it was just a county election, their rented house was

in constant upheaval—phones ringing, people in and out. And after he won, Betty Raye made him promise not to do that to her again. He held that office for a year and did a good job. But he was anxious to move on. What Hamm wanted next was to run for state commissioner of agriculture. All Betty Raye wanted was for them to buy a home of their own. At the moment they had nothing but a two-year-old baby and the use of a car the county had provided. But Hamm was not thinking about a house. He was thinking about his future. He knew that if he could win this one election, it would get his foot in the door of statewide politics.

All those years of selling tractors and shaking hands had to add up to something. But he would be running against a strong incumbent. He needed campaign money. He tried to get a bank loan, but the bank turned him down. He knew only one person who might lend him the money. He hated to do it, but he called his old army buddy Rodney Tillman. Rodney had been a top Pontiac salesman before the war and now owned a few used-car lots outside Sedalia. When Hamm got him on the phone, Rodney listened without comment, then said, "How much do you need, Hambo?"

Hamm said, "I think I can do it with five hundred."

"I'll get you six."

Hamm said, "I'll pay you back."

"I know you will."

"I'll never forget this, buddy," said Hamm.

"Don't worry about it. You just go out and win the damn thing."

Once again Betty Raye's homelife was turned upside down. As soon as Hamm announced, the house was filled with men coming and going, day and night. Six months later it was over, and Hamm was state commissioner of agriculture.

ON JANUARY 3 Dwight D. Eisenhower was sworn in as the President of the United States, and Tot Whooten was not happy about it. She said, "Just my luck. The first time I take the trouble to vote, and my man loses." On January 21 Neighbor Dorothy and Mother Smith traveled to Kansas City to welcome Harry and Bess Truman

back home to Missouri. The two women stood in the crowd at the station along with ten thousand other people and waited for the train. It was hard to realize that Harry would no longer be in the White House, but as they say, time marches on.

Though other things in the world changed, *The Neighbor Dorothy Show* remained the same. February 19 was a cold, wet, windy day. Dorothy had just finished her last Golden Flake Flour commercial and was rather subdued. As the show was ending, she said, "You know, so many of you have written in over the years and asked me what is the best thing for a blue mood. I can only tell what helps me, and that is baking. There's just something about baking a cake that gets me out of a mood. You all know I've been a little blue lately, missing my children, but I feel much better today, and I'd like to share a letter with you we got from Bobby yesterday.

"Dear Mother,

"Since you gave out my address over the radio, you would not believe how many cards and letters and other good stuff has come my way. Please thank them all for me and the rest of the guys, who are helping me eat all the cookies, fudge, and cakes that have made it all the way to Korea. I guess it took sending me over here to really appreciate my hometown. So love to Pop, and slam the screen door so your listeners won't be too lonesome for me.

"Love, your son,
"Pfc. Bobby Smith

"And I also want to thank you," Dorothy said. "You all have been so sweet to send him things. I don't like to get sentimental, but I will say this: We all know he was a handful. I think of all the times I yelled at him to sit still, to stop running, not to slam the door, but today I'd give a million dollars if I could hear him slam that door or see a cake where he had run a finger around the bottom."

To Dorothy's great disappointment, the very day Bobby turned eighteen, Monroe and he had driven over to Poplar Bluff, and he had joined the army and left school.

MARCH 1953. FROM THE TIME Bobby arrived in Korea, he'd felt as if he were trapped inside the big display he used to see in the window at the Morgan Brothers department store every Christmas. But in this winter wonderland the things moving around were ugly—brown tanks, men with machine guns, and medics carrying stretchers full of wounded, dead, or dying soldiers. Bloodstains littered the white snow, and Bobby vowed that if he ever got out of there alive, he never wanted to see snow again. But with each hour that passed, the chances of him getting out of there alive grew less likely. His company was surrounded on all sides.

It had happened overnight. They heard the North Korean tanks to the south and more moving in from the north. As it was, there were only fourteen men left. They had lost communications a few days ago and were huddled together in a round ditch they had dug. They were supposed to have been relieved a week earlier, but they had been pushed back so far behind the lines they couldn't be sure they would be found. They had no idea where they were or how far away the other Americans were.

Everything was cold and white. They couldn't see more than a foot in front of them. When it wasn't snowing, a white, misty ground fog came in. It was as if the war were being fought in cotton. The sound of machine-gun fire was all around them, soft and muffled. Most of these men, including Bobby, had grown up watching World War II movies, but this was no movie. And their sergeant was not John Wayne. He was a twenty-two-year-old kid from Akron, Ohio, who had just gotten married a year ago. Soon they had run out of everything—food, ammunition, and options. They were trapped. Dead if they moved, dead if they didn't.

Then, at about one o'clock that afternoon, Bobby suddenly said to the man beside him, "The hell with this. I'm going to go find them." He handed the man his gun, crawled over the top of the ditch, and disappeared. He knew he could not stand up without getting his head shot off, so he crawled. As he inched forward in the snow, he remembered something Jimmy had told him at the Trolley Car Diner years ago, right before the bubble gum contest:

"Don't look right. Don't look left. Concentrate. Stay the course." He repeated it over and over in his mind, thinking about that day, about the bubble he blew, about the applause. "Don't get rattled. Nice and easy all the way." While he continued to inch forward, his best friend, Monroe, was sitting in the drugstore in Elmwood Springs, drinking cherry Cokes with his girlfriend, Peggy, and asking Doc if he had heard from Bobby.

Twenty-eight hours later Bobby had crawled within twenty feet of a North Korean machine-gun nest, where three soldiers were sleeping. But he never saw them. After he made it up the hill, he stood up and ran and fell and ran again until someone heard him yelling at the top of his lungs, "Hi-yo, Silver, away!" The Americans, quick to shoot at anything that moved, knew at once that this was no Korean, and they came out and found him. He was half out of his mind and had no idea why he had been yelling, but it saved his life.

By the time he was able to lead that company to his outfit, six of the men had frozen to death, but they saved the rest. He refused a medal and never told anyone what he had done. As he explained to the major, "There was nothing brave about it. I was just too scared to stay there and die."

BOBBY came out of the army happy to be home, but a very different man from the one who had left. He was quiet and introspective and seemed to have lost his old zest for life. While he was gone, Monroe had married Peggy and was working for her father at the tire store. The two friends had gone fishing and bowling a few times, but Bobby mostly just sat around the house or went down to the diner and talked to Jimmy.

After a few months Dorothy became very concerned. She began to wonder if he would ever go back to being his old self. She thought if he just found a nice girl and fell in love, it would help him. She did not know it, but her son had already fallen hopelessly in love, and he was not over it yet.

Bobby had had crushes on girls for years, but when he was seventeen, he had fallen so completely and painfully head over heels

in love that it almost killed him. When she smiled at him or spoke to him in the most casual way, he had lived off it for a week. He had been a gangly, pimply-faced boy, and she was a grown woman of twenty-eight. He could not tell anyone, not even Monroe, so he suffered in silence.

She was Miss Anne Hatcher, the drama teacher with the beautiful voice and soft brown eyes; Miss Anne Hatcher, who had broken his heart when at the start of his junior year she became engaged to Hugh Sparrow, the high school civics teacher. Sparrow was an older widower with two children. Bobby hated the paunchy, balding man and fantasized about challenging him to a duel. Instead, the day he was eighteen, he joined the army. He had thought about her all through the war, and now that he was home, what had been a burning love was a dull ache in the pit of his stomach. He felt little enthusiasm for anything. It seemed as if all the magic had gone out of the world, and he was bored and restless.

But then one night Monroe and Peggy took Bobby with them to the Polar Bear Tastee-Freez drive-in, and Wanda Ricketts, wearing a short skirt with fringe, skated up to the car and took their order, and suddenly a light came back into Bobby's eyes. "Who's that?" he asked as she skated away.

Peggy told him the Ricketts family had moved to town a few years ago, and added, "I hear she's a little fast."

"Really?" said Bobby, his curiosity piqued even further.

She had been dating three or four different boys in town, but they were no match for Bobby, who had grown into a good-looking young man. Pretty soon he and Miss Wanda Ricketts were a hot-and-heavy item, and his old enthusiasm started coming back, along with his imagination. As usual, Bobby started to romanticize Wanda and to see things that were not there. He spent a dazzled two months convinced she looked exactly like Marilyn Monroe, which could not have been further from the truth. Other than their dyed blond hair and being female, the similarity ended.

The rose-colored glasses eventually started clearing up a little, and he started noticing how she began to look less and less like

Marilyn Monroe. He then took a closer look at the Ricketts family, who were "big wrestling fans." The thought of spending the holidays with the Ricketts for the rest of his life did the trick. When Bobby told his mother he had broken up with Wanda, she did not ask why. All she said was, "Well, I'm sure you know best, dear."

Several months later Wanda, clearly not heartbroken over breaking up with Bobby, ran off and married the twenty-five-year-old manager of the Polar Bear drive-in.

The next time Macky Warren saw Bobby at the barbershop, he said, "Had yourself a kind of a close call there, didn't you?"

It was a small town.

THE Friday after Macky had run into Bobby, he was busy searching through his stock for a fifteen-foot extension cord for Old Man Henderson when the phone rang. He said, "Let me get this," and went back and picked up. "Hardware." It was Norma on the other end. "Hi, honey. Can I call you back? I've got a customer."

"I'll hold on."

"Okay."

He returned to the old man standing in the aisle pulling out all the cords. Macky said, "Are you sure you need fifteen feet?"

The old man said, "Yeah. I might use twenty. Do you have that?"

"What's it for?"

"I want to put my TV on the porch so I can see the ball game."

"Don't you have a plug on the porch?"

"Well, if I did, I wouldn't need an extension cord, would I?"

Macky searched through the cords. "Here's a twenty-five."

Mr. Henderson scowled at him. "How much more by the foot?"

"Don't worry. I'll just charge you for a fifteen-foot. I thought I had them in stock." He pulled out a paper bag.

"I don't need a sack," the old man said.

"All right. Well, you have a good day now."

Macky started putting the cords back up on the hooks. Then he remembered Norma was holding on. He went back and took the phone. "Honey, are you still there?"

"Yes." After a pregnant pause she said, "I just had my hair done."

Macky sat down on the stool behind the counter. Today was her appointment with Tot Whooten. He knew what was coming.

"Do not say one word to me, Macky. If you're going to come home and say anything, just don't come home."

"I'm not going to say anything. What did she do this time?"

"I'm upset enough as it is without you saying something."

"Norma! I haven't said a word. I haven't even *seen* you."

"Well, I want you to promise you won't say anything, or I'm going to check into the Howard Johnson's, and that's all there is to it."

"All right, Norma, calm down. I won't say anything, okay? Just give me a hint. What did you have done?"

There was a long silence. "A body wave."

"A body wave?"

"Yes, like a permanent, only lighter."

"What happened?"

"We don't know. All we know is it wasn't light."

"Well, honey, don't worry. It will grow out. It did the last time."

"It doesn't have to grow out," she said.

"Why?"

"Because if you must know, she cut it off."

"Oh God."

"See! I can't tell you a thing without you having a negative attitude. You ask me to tell you; then you say something smart."

"Okay, okay. I'm sorry. I'll bet it looks great. How short is it?" There was no answer. "It can't be all that short, can it?"

"It's short."

"How short?"

"It's an Italian boy cut."

"What?"

"It's called an Italian boy cut."

"Oh God."

"That's it! Get your own lunch. I'm going to the motel."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Norma, you're not going to any motel. I'll be home in a little while."

Macky had been home for ten minutes, but Norma would not come out of the bedroom. Finally, after much coaxing, she stood in the doorway. He looked at her. "Well . . . it's short all right."

Norma burst into tears. "I'm ruined. I just want to die. I was supposed to look like Audrey Hepburn. It looked cute in the picture."

"Oh, honey, honey, stop it. It looks cute."

"No, it doesn't. You're just saying that to make me feel better."

"No, I'm not. It's cute. Really."

Later that night, just before Norma was about to fall asleep, Macky turned over and said, "Honey, I just wanted you to know one thing."

"What."

"You are the sexiest Italian boy I ever slept with."

There was a pause. Then Norma patted his hand. *"Muchos gracias, señor."*

BOBBY had finished his high school equivalency test in the army and had been home about four months when he decided he would go to Missouri State and get a degree in something. In what, he did not know. At one time Doc had hoped he would follow in his footsteps and become a pharmacist, but considering how bad Bobby was at math and chemistry, that was obviously out. He guessed maybe he would take business administration, but he was not sure. He still had not made up his mind until he arrived on campus and reread all the options available. Finally he chose American history.

In the romance department, many times when a person does not know what is bad for them, they often do not know what is good for them either. Bobby started dating Lois Scott, an English major, in his sophomore year after more or less playing the field. He had met her through a friend, and as it turned out, she was from Poplar Bluff, and they had a lot of friends in common. On their first date Lois took him out on the tennis court and beat the socks off him. She was smart, attractive, had a great sense of humor, beautiful red hair, and *most* important, she was crazy about him.

Dorothy took to Lois in two seconds, in the mysterious way

women do when they know the perfect daughter-in-law has just walked in the door. And it was not only Dorothy. Everybody liked Lois right away—Mother Smith, Anna Lee, and Doc. They all said she was the perfect girl for Bobby. He agreed. He knew he loved Lois, yet just like a man, the night before his wedding he wondered if he was doing the right thing after all, and was it too late to back out now—all the things you think right before you jump off a mountain. But Monroe, his best man, calmed him down with these few words of wisdom: "You stupid jackass. She's the best thing that ever happened to you." And when Bobby saw Lois coming down the aisle, he almost fainted when he realized this beautiful woman was actually going to marry him.

IN 1956 BETTY Raye had another little baby boy and was enjoying life as a wife and mother. They still lived in a rented house, but Hamm was saving money to buy it. Everything was going along according to plan until—after serving only two years as state commissioner of agriculture—Hamm became so angry with the way the small farmer was being ignored, and so fed up with not having any power to do anything about it, he decided to enter the Democratic primary for governor. Betty Raye begged him not to, and she was not the only one who thought it a bad idea. Everybody tried to tell him he was a fool to think he could launch a gubernatorial campaign out of nowhere and with no money, but he refused to listen. "Betty Raye," he said. "Honey, if you go along with me just this one time, I promise you, if I lose, I will get out of politics for good." All she would have to do is pose for one picture with him and the kids. He would do the rest.

What could she do? She loved him. So Hamm Sparks entered the primaries. He was convinced he did not need fancy campaign headquarters with a staff of political advisers. His headquarters would be the back roads and small towns across the state. All he had to do to get his platform across was look people in the eye and tell it to them like it was. Tell them they needed someone who would be on the side of the veteran, the workingman, and the small

farmer. This sounded good, but after running up and down the state for over a month in a field of twelve hopefuls, he was running dead last. Most people in the state had no idea who he was, but the kind of money he needed to get his name out to the public was much more than Rodney Tillman had. More than anyone he knew or had ever met had . . . or so he thought.

JUST four hundred miles away, in the six-room Kansas City apartment he shared with his mother, Cecil Figgs was preparing to go to work. He stood at his dressing table, carefully attached a small toupee to the front of his large round head, and placed a fresh flower in his lapel, ready to face the day. When he walked into his thickly carpeted office at the funeral home, he picked up the newspaper on his desk. Usually he skipped straight to the obituaries to check his ads, but a picture of Sparks jumped out at him. He was listed as a candidate running for governor. Cecil Figgs supposed Hamm would not remember meeting him five years ago at Ferris Oatman's funeral, but Cecil had never forgotten Hamm Sparks. When the funeral concluded, Hamm had walked up to him at the reception afterward and introduced himself, shaking his hand and telling him what a good job he had done. He then shoved a business card at him and said, "Mr. Figgs, if you're ever in the market for a good tractor, be sure and give me a call."

Cecil had been dumbfounded. He was the last person on earth to ever need a tractor. Still, there was something so genuinely earnest about the man that instead of tearing Hamm's card up, he put it in his pocket. For some reason he had been very affected by the hunky little guy. Although Cecil had been busy dealing with all the details, he had watched out of the corner of his eye as Hamm walked around the reception with nothing going for him but a bad blue suit, a two-dollar haircut, and sheer nerve, trying so hard to mingle with the governor and his staff. Whatever it was, because of this strange attachment he had formed to Hamm Sparks, when Cecil saw his picture in the paper, wearing the same bad suit with the same bad haircut, he felt compelled to look him up and try to help

him if he could. And nobody needed more help at the moment.

Hamm had no real staff except for his old friends who stopped by every once in a while, and Rodney Tillman. His campaign office was a small one-room storefront. The amenities consisted of a desk, four metal folding chairs, and a phone.

Cecil picked up the phone and called Hamm to set up a meeting and was somewhat surprised that Hamm seemed to remember him. Cecil did not understand that he was a man very few people would forget. How many men in Missouri wear purple flowers in their lapel and a bad hairpiece the color of root beer?

A few days later Cecil walked into the campaign office, looked around the dingy room, and shook his head. The first thing he said to Hamm was, "Oh, honey, you need a better place than this." Cecil cleaned off a chair, sat down, and said, "Listen, if you expect to stay in this thing, you are going to have to get a decent place to work out of and some better advertising. Now, I have a lot of money, and if you are really serious about staying in this thing, I'm willing to back you."

Hamm could not believe his luck. He jumped up and shook Cecil's hand. "Mr. Figgs, I'm as serious as a boil on an old maid's behind, and if you will help me, I promise to fight as hard as I can."

"I'm sure you will," said Cecil. "Just figure out how much you need, and let me know. And it's Cecil." Then he got up and started to leave.

Hamm followed him to the door. "Hey, wait a minute. Don't you need to hear my platform?"

"Oh no, darling," Cecil said, dismissing him. "I don't know a thing about platforms. I'll just give you the money and leave the politics part up to you."

Thus began the most unlikely of friendships between the two men, one that nobody ever understood. Hamm and Cecil did not even understand it themselves.

When Rodney came sauntering into the office with a bottle of whiskey and two paper cups, as he did every afternoon, Hamm was sitting at his desk beaming from ear to ear.

"Hey, Hambo, what's up?"

"Rodney, I just got a serious backer with big money. Cecil Figgs, the Funeral King. You just missed him. He said he would pay for the whole campaign, give me whatever I needed. I'm writing out a list right now."

Rodney looked somewhat skeptical. He knew how much money it would take. "Ol' buddy, I'm afraid somebody's been kidding you. Nobody's that rich."

But Cecil had not been kidding. He was that rich. Not only was he the Funeral King of Missouri, over the years he had quietly bought mortuaries in seven other states and branched out into wider areas as well. With the mortuary and floral business, combined with his 50 percent interest in the Perpetual Rest Custom Casket Company, he was a very wealthy man, and he had no qualms about spending money. In his business he was reminded on an hourly basis that life was short and you cannot take it with you. He had no children to leave it to, so why not spend it and, in this case, take a chance on a dark horse? However, in this case there were also other motivations at play. There was something he wanted in return, but he did not want to tip his hand yet.

Hamm immediately phoned Betty Raye's uncle Le Roy Oatman over in Nashville, who had a hillbilly band called the Tennessee Plowboys. Hamm hired them. A week later Hamm Sparks, with a flatbed truck and Le Roy's group—renamed the Missouri Plowboys—said good-bye to Betty Raye and the kids and hit the road. They went everywhere, from V.F.W. fish frys to Bingo games. Anyplace where more than ten people gathered, Hamm was there.

WENDELL Hewitt, clearly the people's choice for governor, had taken the lead in the polls from the first day and kept it. He was a six-foot-two, affable, hard-drinking man with an eye for the ladies, and he was not only a good politician with a law background but also an independent thinker. People liked him. However, the state Democratic higher-ups did not. They wanted a party man they could control, and Wendell Hewitt was not it. As far as they were

concerned, he was a loose cannon. Peter Wheeler, a wealthy, rather effete insurance executive from Kansas City, was their man. But they had a problem. Their man was a bit stuffy and could never win against the popular Wendell. Behind closed doors, Earl Finley, the head of the party, agreed it would be best if Hewitt were out of the race altogether. A month later, by some miracle and a lot of money exchanging hands, their prayers were answered. A photograph of Wendell leaving a motel room with someone other than his wife appeared in the Kansas City *Star.* Wendell assumed the Republicans had done him in, but he took it like a good sport. In his TV address he said, "If my opponents are going to continue to use beautiful young blondes as bait, they are going to catch me every time."

With Wendell out of the race, Pete Wheeler was a shoo-in. Or so they thought. To Earl Finley and the boys, little Hamm Sparks was nothing more than a joke. But during the weeks they had been concentrating on getting rid of Wendell Hewitt, the Hamm Sparks dog and pony show had hit every small town, farm community, and railroad crossing with a vengeance.

Hamm more or less did the same speech everywhere, and the audiences, men in overalls and John Deere caps, women in cotton dresses and bonnets, seemed to be hanging on to every word he said. "Now, folks," he would say, "make no mistake, the big mules want your vote. They smile at you and promise to love, honor, and obey. Trying to get you to the altar. But you should hear how they talk about you behind closed doors. They think you're stupid. They think they can just do anything they want up there and get away with it. It reminds me of when I was a boy out in the country. My mother would open up the pantry, and here would be all these mealy worms and moths eating away at our cornmeal and flour. And she would yell out, 'Daddy, we've got pests in the pantry.' Now, I've been up at the state capital for a few years, and folks, we've got pests in the state's pantry, and if you elect me, I'm gonna get rid of every one of them. I'll chop all that extra fat right off the budget and put that money back in the workingman's pocket where it belongs—not to pay the salaries of folks in the governor's man-

sion to cook up lace-panty lamb chops. Good old American hamburger is just fine with me.

"Now, I could have gone after support from some of these big-money interest groups and be doing a whole lot better, but I didn't. Why? Because I don't want to be in debt to anybody but you. So I'm asking you to give me a little something today, just a little loan. What will I put up for collateral? Well, I don't have much. I don't own a house. My car's not paid for. You can't have my wife. But I'll tell you, what you can have is my word. My word that if you send me up there as your governor, I'll work for you. The only payback I want to have to make is to you people, and I'll pay it back, road by road, school by school, and electric pole by electric pole."

After each speech, while the Missouri Plowboys played, everyone in the audience would come up and put money in a big barrel that had HAMM'S PEST CONTROL written on the side. As Hamm's numbers started to rise, Earl Finley counterattacked. He hired a huge Dixieland band to travel with Pete Wheeler and brought in top entertainers for all his fund-raisers. At the big Kansas City "Peter Wheeler for Governor" dinner, they even flew big Kate Smith in from New York to open the evening with "God Bless America."

With all the money and effort going into the Wheeler campaign, Hamm started to worry. The more he thought about his promise to Betty Raye to quit politics if he lost, the more desperate he became. After being gone for a week, he came into the bedroom around 3:00 a.m. "Sweetheart," he said, shaking her.

She opened her eyes. "Hey . . . what time is it?"

He sat down on the bed. "It's late. But I need to talk to you."

"Is anything wrong?" She sat up and switched on the light, then reached for her glasses.

He sighed. "Honey, you know I wouldn't bother you with any of this if I didn't have to, but I need your help." He looked so pitiful she reached over and took his hand. He hesitated a moment and then said, "With all the big money being thrown at Peter Wheeler, I'm in trouble."

"What can I do?"

"Well," he said, "I hate to ask, but the boys were talking, and they think that since your momma and the Oatmans have such a big following, if you were on the platform with me and let me introduce you to the audience, it might help."

The baby in the other room suddenly started to cry. Betty Raye got up out of bed, and Hamm followed her. "All you would have to do is just sit there, honey; you wouldn't have to sing or anything. And I'd get to be with you and the kids a lot more. . . ."

For the next two or three weeks they traveled up and down the state, sometimes making six or seven stops in one day. This was a grueling schedule for the men, but with two children to take care of, Betty Raye was exhausted. Still, Hamm kept his promise. All she had to do was smile and wave as he introduced her as not only his wife but also the daughter of Minnie Oatman, the great gospel star, and the announcement was met with strong applause.

She did all of this without complaining, but when Hamm did his speech in Clark County, he pushed her over the edge. Right in the middle of it he said, "You know, folks, I have a soft spot in my heart for Clark County. My wife and I spent our honeymoon right up the road here." Then he looked over to where she was sitting and said, "So you might say little Hamm Sparks, Jr., there got his start in Clark County." And if that was not bad enough, amid hollers and guffaws from the audience, he put his hand up and said, "That's all right, folks. I assure you the pleasure was all mine."

Betty Raye wanted to die right there on the spot.

As election day grew closer, Hamm announced that if elected, he would ban alcohol from the governor's mansion. He knew that would set well with the state's large Baptist and Pentecostal population. What it all boiled down to in the end was not so much that Hamm Sparks won the primary, but that a lot of people just did not warm up to Peter Wheeler. However, the day after the election a lot of people woke up and said, "Who is Hamm Sparks?" Fortunately for Hamm, his Republican opponent, incumbent Delbert K. Whisenknot, had a terrible voting record and the looks and personality of a hedgehog. Still, beating him was no easy feat. The two

were neck and neck right down to the wire, and Hamm just barely squeaked in with a lot of last-minute help. In the rural counties it was truly amazing how many goats, bulls, and heifers showed up to vote. One black-and-white sowbelly hog over in Sullivan County by the name of Buddy T. Bacon even voted twice. This phenomenon was no more amazing than the large number of deceased people who suddenly rose from the dead to vote for Hamm. And nobody knew more names of the dear departed than Cecil Figgs.

On his first day in office, Hamm did a smart thing. He called Peter Wheeler to offer him a position in his administration. Which Wheeler graciously declined, as Hamm knew he would. Next, he called Wendell Hewitt and asked him if he would consider the office of state attorney general. Hewitt said yes. It was a good move. Even though Wendell Hewitt had been caught in a motel with a blonde, he was still a popular man with the people.

The second thing Hamm did was to save the taxpayers' money. As part of his "Get Rid of the Pests in the Pantry" program, he announced that he was replacing all the paid staff at the governor's mansion in Jefferson City with inmates from the state prison, and from now on all the vegetables used at state dinners would come from the garden he was putting in at the back of the mansion.

Hamm's third order of business was to pay back those who had helped him. He brought in about twenty old friends and gave each of them an office. Everybody got something. Le Roy Oatman and the Missouri Plowboys were named "state musicians" and were hired to play for all functions at the governor's mansion. Rodney Tillman was appointed press secretary, and Seymour Gravel, another old army buddy down on his luck, was named public safety director and was to serve as Hamm's personal bodyguard. Everyone wondered how Cecil Figgs would fit into the new administration. Figgs was not a politician. What could he possibly want from Hamm?

A few weeks later they found out. A very unhappy Rodney Tillman came into Wendell Hewitt's office with the bad news. "He's just appointed Cecil chief of protocol of the state."

"What? There's no such thing."

"There is now. He's giving him the office across the hall."

Wendell shook his head in disgust. "Things are bad enough with all these bozos he's brought in. Now we're going to have Cecil Figgs fluttering around here for the next four years."

In Kansas City, Earl Finley sat in a room in the back of Democratic headquarters with ten other worried men, chewing on his cigar, his pig eyes darting back and forth. "Well, boys," he said, "we now have a tractor salesman, an ex–gospel singer, a fairy mortician, and a drunk sitting up in the governor's mansion. Just how in the hell are we going to get them out?"

PEOPLE may have wondered why Cecil Figgs, who certainly did not need the measly pittance the office of chief of protocol paid, had accepted the post. But Cecil had a good reason. After reaching the top of his profession, he had become bored. He no longer planned the smaller funerals, only the large and important ones, but he wanted a bigger venue, and now, thanks to his investment in Hamm's campaign, he had the entire state to work with.

The first thing Cecil did as the new chief of protocol was to insist on changing the state troopers' uniforms. He explained to a room full of flabbergasted state senators—who would have to pass the bill to get the funding—that he wanted to eliminate the old gray uniforms and create a new look, bright blue with red stripes and lots of gold buttons. Cecil got nowhere fast. At the end of the day he'd managed to get funding for a special honor guard uniform to trot out on state occasions. However, there were three stipulations in the bill: 1) no swords, 2) no plumes, 3) no white boots.

Cecil was in a fit over that, but at least he got his honor guard. The next week he had a slew of decorators descend on the mansion. Thanks to Hamm's budget cuts, the entire staff working in the governor's mansion were trustees brought in from the state penitentiary. The cooks in the mansion, down to a woman, were all murderers, as well as the maids and yard workers, with a few thieves and one five-time bigamist thrown in for good measure. But no matter their

checkered past, Cecil made sure they were all in starched white uniforms at all times. An ice-pick murderess named Alberta Peets, who did not like to wear shoes, was told by Cecil that she could not go barefoot around the mansion. This upset her very much, and some said Cecil was living on borrowed time.

He did not seem to notice. He was too busy making sure that when out-of-town dignitaries came to visit, they would not think they were in Dogpatch, U.S.A. After about a month of Cecil Figgs and his decorator friends running amok through the place, jerking down curtains, putting up new ones, Rodney Tillman, at the behest of everyone, went into Hamm's office and complained about him.

But Hamm just dismissed it and said, "Oh, let him have his fun—he earned it."

"But Hamm, he's upsetting the staff," said Rodney.

"Well, that's their problem. They're just going to have to learn to put up with him; he's not hurting anybody."

Rodney made no headway with Hamm. Whatever Hamm's reason for keeping Cecil around, he must have known what he was doing. Of course, there were jokes. People snickered behind their backs that Cecil Figgs was really the first lady, but Hamm didn't hear it, and besides, he was too busy to deal with silly gossip. And Cecil was far too busy, as he said, "trying to bring a little couth into the governor's mansion." He did complain daily about Hamm's ban on alcohol. He said it had been an embarrassment to the state, offering only lemonade and grape Kool-Aid to the President and First Lady of France when they visited. And even though he could be a holy terror and fly into a fit over the smallest detail, Cecil was always kind to Betty Raye.

As far as Betty Raye was concerned, she was more than happy, even relieved, to let Cecil plan the parties and entertain the guests who came to the mansion. Cecil understood how shy she was and would ask her to come to a function only if he thought it was absolutely necessary. She would go whenever he did ask and was glad when Cecil gave her the nod that she could slip out.

Other than those few functions, she mostly remained in the back-

ground. The one thing she hated more than anything about being first lady was having to raise her children in the mansion. She felt as if they were living in a fishbowl. She could not even go down to the kitchen for a drink of water without running into a tour group. And she could not leave or go anywhere without having a state trooper with her. But she did not complain. Hamm was happier than she had ever seen him. And after all, it was only for four years. After this term was up, he promised her, he would go back to private life and buy them a home. For that, she could stand it for a few years.

CECIL Figgs was as happy as a lark planning all the governor's social events, but nobody on Hamm's staff was having a better time than his old friend Rodney Tillman. Being in charge of the governor's public relations was quite a jump from used-car salesman. One afternoon Rodney came strolling into Hamm's office, sat down, and said, "Hey, Hambo, how would you like to have a boat?"

Hamm looked up from his papers. "A boat? What kind of a boat?"

"A big boat." He reached into his shirt pocket and threw a photograph of a brand-new thirty-five-foot Chris-Craft cabin cruiser on Hamm's desk.

Hamm looked at it and smiled. "You know I've always wanted a boat. Why?"

Rodney leaned in and said, "Because, ol' buddy, I know a fellow that's just dying to give you one just like that."

"Give me one. What for?"

"He figured, with all the stress you're under, that you need a place where you can go and relax, get away from it all. This boat he's just dying to give you sleeps eight and can slip on down to Florida, or the Bahamas for that matter, anytime you want to take a little trip."

"Who is this guy?"

"Just a big supporter who wants to do something nice for you."

"What's the matter with you, Rodney? As long as I'm governor, you know I can't take gifts from anybody."

"Well, hell, Hambo, I know that. But suppose he was to lock this

boat up in a boathouse somewhere for you to borrow anytime you wanted. And suppose he was to give me the key to this boathouse to keep for you until you are no longer governor and can accept a gift from a friend." Rodney leaned back in the chair and crossed his hands behind his head.

Hamm pushed the picture back across the desk. "Tell him thanks, but I better not."

Rodney shrugged and said, "All right. I was just thinking how much fun it might be for your boys down the line." He walked out and left the picture on Hamm's desk.

For a week Hamm kept taking that picture out of his desk drawer and looking at it. The second week, he called Wendell Hewitt, the attorney general, into his office and said, "Listen, as governor, would it be illegal for me to borrow a boat from somebody?"

Wendell said, "No, why?"

"I just wondered." On the fourth week, Hamm decided it would not hurt to just take a look at it. The big supporter had so hoped he would accept the gift that he had gone so far as to have a name painted on the side. The moment Hamm saw *The Betty Raye,* he was in love.

Hamm did not know it, but the big supporter was a Mr. Anthony Leo from St. Louis. When Hamm commuted Mr. Leo's brother's scheduled execution to a life sentence, he had been grateful. All Hamm knew was that Rodney had come into the office that day and seemed very nervous until he had finished signing all his pardons. Wendell, who advised Hamm, agreed with Hamm's decision. After all, the man had not killed an innocent person; he had just shot some other Mob hood. Hamm said, "He probably did the state a favor."

They both had done Rodney a favor and did not know it. Rodney had a large gambling debt that had just been crossed off the books. But Hamm was no fool either. He never told anyone about *The Betty Raye* except a few people he could trust. But he did use it every chance he got.

ONE AFTERNOON WHEN HE and Rodney were out cruising around the Missouri River, having a few drinks and smoking a few cigars, Hamm said, "You know, Rodney, I've been thinking. When my term is up, it sure would be nice if Betty Raye and the kids and I were to have a nice house we could move into right away. Sort of like a loan, and then, when I get a good job down the line, I can pay for it. What do you think?"

Rodney said, "Oh, I think that could be arranged."

"And a car. Maybe one of those new DeSotos."

"No sweat," Rodney said. "What color?"

"Blue."

Blue was his favorite color. And after all, as Rodney had said, what is the point of being governor if you can't have a good time?

DOROTHY was very happy these days. Both her children were married to wonderful people, she already had three beautiful granddaughters, and Anna Lee had just called and told her she was expecting another baby. So she was particularly cheerful today.

"Good morning, everybody. I hope all of you out there are as happy this morning as I am, and here's something to make you even more cheerful. Mrs. Joanne Ault of Woodlawn, Missouri, writes, 'Dear Neighbor Dorothy, I read a good book I would like to pass on to your listeners. If they want a good laugh, read *Cheaper by the Dozen* by Frank Gilbreth, Jr., and Ernestine Gilbreth Carey.'

"All right. Thank you for that. I only like to recommend books that are cheerful. I know there are sad things out in the world, but I just don't want to dwell on them. I guess I'm like one of those ostriches; I just stick my head in the sand. I don't want to face facts. Scientists are determined to tell us what the moon is made of and what the stars are and why there are rainbows, but I don't want to know. When I wish on a star, I don't need to know what it's made out of, and when a thing is beautiful, what does it matter why? Nature gives us so many wonders to look at . . . which brings me to my next letter. It comes to us from Mrs. Anne Carter of Repton, Missouri. She writes:

"Dear Neighbor Dorothy,

"Have you ever wondered what is at the end of the rainbow? Well, yesterday my family and I were driving out in the country, and when a small rainstorm cleared, my son called our attention to a huge rainbow that had formed across the sky. The end of it seemed to be in the road ahead. I drove to the spot, and when we all got out of the car and looked at each other, our skin seemed to glow with iridescent colors of pink and blue and green. We could not believe our eyes. We were standing in the rainbow. If that is not a miracle, I don't know what is. God truly blessed my family and me that day, and we will never forget it."

Mother Smith played a little of "Somewhere over the Rainbow."

"Thank you for sharing that beautiful story with us, Mrs. Carter. Now every time I see a rainbow, I'll think of you and your family standing in the rainbow! I ask you. Isn't life wonderful?"

The Sixties

AFTER Bobby graduated, he got a teaching job at Franklin Pierce, a small college in Rindge, New Hampshire, and he and Lois were provided with a nice house on a lake. Although he made very little money, life was good for a while. They loved the college and the town, but they were not used to the cold winters. Also, after his time in Korea, months of snow depressed him, and so Bobby started looking around for a warmer place. In the meantime he and Lois were expecting their first child. As soon as they could, they came back to Missouri to visit. They spent a week with Lois's parents and a week with Doc and Dorothy.

While they were in Elmwood Springs, their old friend Charlie Fowler, the poultry inspector, called and said he wanted to stop by

for dinner. It had been a few years, and Bobby was glad to see him. He had been at their wedding and had sent them a lovely gift. After dinner, when the men headed out for a smoke, Fowler asked Bobby if he would take a little walk with him.

"Sure," said Bobby.

They walked out to the backyard and sat down in the lawn chairs by the Sweetheart Swing. After a while Mr. Fowler said, "I've been knowing you and your family for a long time now. Watched you and your sister grow up."

"Yes, sir."

Fowler cleared his throat. "You know, if I had a son such as yourself just starting out in life, I would say to him . . . But since I don't, I'm going to tell it to *you* instead. Young Robert," he said, "We . . . you and I . . . have to stop pecking around in the barnyard of mediocrity and dare to fly with eagles. That's why a few years back I started buying up an interest in as many chicken farms as I could. The poultry business is changing. It's no longer just an egg world. It's a fried-chicken-in-a-bucket-to-go world." He leaned closer. "Now, son, this is strictly between you and me, but I just signed an exclusive contract with this fellow over in Kentucky to supply him with all his chickens. Don't get me wrong. I'm not making money yet, but the way business is booming, I wouldn't be surprised if this fellow doesn't open up another place real soon."

"Really?" said Bobby.

"Yep. And it all pans out with my theory about the future."

"What's your theory?"

"Quantity," he said emphatically. "Not quality. Fast, not friendly. That's the secret of making money nowadays. This is the jet age."

Bobby nodded and thought about it.

"Anyhow, young Robert, I'm looking for a good man to work for me. Say the word, and the job is yours."

Bobby was flattered by the offer, but he did not know a thing about the poultry business. "I sure appreciate you considering me, Mr. Fowler, but—"

Fowler did not let him finish. "Now," he said as he pulled a small

notebook out of his pocket, "I'm going to write down what you can expect to earn the first year." He jotted down a number and handed it to Bobby. "You'd have to relocate, but I think it is a chance worth taking, and I give you my word, son, if *I* do well, *you* do well." The number Fowler showed him was twice the salary he was making.

Bobby was torn. He hated to give up teaching, but with a baby on the way . . . He and Lois talked. They decided to get out of the cold of New Hampshire and take a chance with Mr. Fowler.

UNFORTUNATELY, things were not turning out as well for Betty Raye as they seemed to be for Bobby. Hamm did not keep his word to her, and in 1960 he decided to run for another four years as governor. He was at the height of his popularity, and he said not to run would be a terrible waste of all the time and energy he had put in. He promised her that if he could have this one more term, it would definitely be the end. "Hon," he said, "state law says a governor can't serve three consecutive terms. What better guarantee can you have than that?" And like it or not, she had to admit Hamm had turned out to be a wonderful governor. Also, the good news about Hamm's popularity was that in this election she and the boys did not have to go on the campaign trail with him. Hamm won the election in a landslide, and Earl Finley had to wait another four years to take back control of the state.

CHARLIE Fowler was a man of his word, and as the company began to grow, so did Bobby's salary. Within a year after their son was born, he and Lois were able to buy a nice house and a new car. They loved living in Kentucky and brought Doc and Dorothy and Mother Smith and Jimmy over for the Kentucky Derby. Dorothy had just lost Princess Mary Margaret to old age, and the trip did her good. It was especially wonderful when she met her new blond, blue-eyed grandson, Michael.

That year, poor Tot lost her mother. Literally. While she was at work, her mother wandered off and got into a car with strangers, who drove her all the way to Salt Lake City, where she wound up

living in a Mormon home for the aged. By the time they found her, she said she did not want to come home, but Tot still had to pay for her room and board each month.

Things also started to change between Hamm and Betty Raye. It was not so much that they had stopped caring for each other; they had just slowly started drifting apart, until gradually, even before they were aware of it, he was living one life and she another. His hours were so erratic they finally stopped sleeping together. He started to use the small room off the master bedroom so as not to disturb her. She had her two boys, whom she adored, and she spent most of her time with them, but still, being so in love with Hamm and not really having him was hard.

HARRY S. Truman once said there were three things that could ruin a man: power, money, and women. Hamm already had power and the promise of money. A woman was getting ready to walk in any day now.

Hamm was determined to be the best governor he could, and he worked hard at it. He made sure he was informed about how people felt on every issue. Along with talking to as many people as he could, he also read every paper in the state. Although he never paid much attention to the society pages, he did begin to notice pictures of this one woman, always photographed at some party or function, in the Kansas City papers. One morning he asked Cecil, "When you were in the funeral business in Kansas City, did you ever know a Mrs. Vita Green?"

"Know her?" Cecil said. "She was one of my best customers and still is. We do the flowers for all her parties. One year she gave a party for my theater group, and we did her entire terrace in white roses. She has the whole top floor of the Highland Plaza apartment building."

"Huh," said Hamm. "What does the husband do?"

"Made a lot of money is all I know. She was divorced before I met her. Why?"

"I was just reading where this Mrs. Green was named head of

some arts council, and I was thinking it might be a good thing for the governor to get involved in."

Cecil was pleased that his attempts to get Hamm interested in culture had finally paid off. Vita Green was a cultural leader in Kansas City and was admired by everyone, especially men. She was a tall, striking-looking woman of forty-three, with shining black hair that she wore parted in the middle and pulled back in a bun at the nape of her neck. She dressed exquisitely but simply, usually in bright red, or emerald green to match her eyes. In addition to being a pleasure to look at, she could converse on any subject. When she received the note from the governor asking if they could meet to discuss the state of the arts in Missouri, her first reaction was to laugh. Vita, along with the rest of her crowd, assumed Sparks was a country bumpkin. She called her good friend Peter Wheeler and said, "You are not going to believe who wants to meet with me."

Wheeler, whom Hamm had defeated six years ago, was as gracious as ever. "I think you should at least hear him out, Vita. He may be trying to branch out a little."

A few days later a member of Hamm's staff called and informed her the governor was going to be in Kansas City on Wednesday. Would she be available in the morning between 8:30 and 9:00? Although it was an ungodly hour for her, she agreed to meet with him at the arts council building downtown. When she arrived, he was already in the president's office. A secretary said, "He says you are to go right in." He was on the phone, sitting with his feet propped up on the windowsill, his back turned toward the door. She stopped at the door, but her perfume did not. It wafted across the desk and caused him to turn around and hang up instantly. In that perfume were the possibilities of every kind of exotic evening.

"Hello, I'm Vita Green," she said.

When he saw the woman he had only seen in black-and-white newspaper photographs standing there in living color, Hamm forgot every other pretty girl he had ever seen in his life. In his entire married life he had never thought of another woman in that way, but when the scent of Vita walked in, all thinking went out the door

and slammed it shut. What stood before him was the Rolls-Royce of womanhood. He could tell by looking at her that she was smarter and more powerful than he was by a mile, and it excited him. And as usual, it did not take him long to make up his mind.

What Vita Green now saw, jumping up and coming around the desk to shake her hand, was a stocky man about her height in low heels, not handsome in the way she was used to, but when he grabbed her hand, she was taken by surprise by the sheer heat of the man. He looked at her with the unguarded genuine appreciation of a male for a female and said, "Mrs. Green, what is it going to take for me to get you? Because I'm telling you right now, I'm gonna move heaven and hell to get it. You want me to jump through hoops for you? Just tell me how high and how many."

To her astonishment she found this total candor completely irresistible. She said, "Why don't we start with dinner?"

Not letting go of her hand and looking right into her eyes, he said, "Mrs. Green, I can't wait that long. How about lunch?"

"It's Vita. Where would you like to go?"

"I don't care. You tell me where and when."

"How about the Downtown Club. Shall we say one o'clock?"

He nodded.

"Will we be discussing the arts, Governor Sparks?"

"It's Hamm, and I sincerely doubt it," he said.

And this is how the relationship of Vita and Hamm began—no courting, no games, just raw physical attraction. There was no struggle for power, only the start of a powerful merger.

NO ONE was surprised when Mrs. Vita Green was named governor's adviser on the arts. People were not in the least bit suspicious when Hamm spent more and more time in Kansas City and left his wife at home. She rarely went anywhere with him anyway. But then few knew that when the governor checked into his suite at the Muehlebach Hotel, he walked in and right back out again, through the basement downstairs, and headed for Vita's apartment. Not only was Vita more wildly attracted to him than she had ever been to any

man in her life, but she liked him. Hamm Sparks was exactly who he was, with no ego, no pretensions. He was an eager student. He wanted to learn, to improve himself. She had a lot to teach.

After she had been with Hamm a year, she paid a visit to Earl Finley. He had known Vita when she was a little girl and her father had been involved in local politics. Finley had always been very fond of her. He knew she had been a large donor to Peter Wheeler's campaign, and he was happy to see her. After a while Vita steered their conversation to Hamm. At the mention of his name Earl practically bit the white plastic tip off his White Owl cigar. "Don't blame us for that, Vita. We tried our best to stop him. But the little hayseed slipped right past us."

Vita said, "Earl, I think you may be wrong about Hamm. He's not stupid. He understands he can't fight you and the senate at the same time. Quit blocking every move he makes, and I'll give you my word he'll push a few things through that you want."

He chewed on his cigar for a moment and blinked his eyes a few times, wondering what she meant. "Aw now, Vita, how can you be sure what that little maverick will do?"

She answered him with a smile that said everything.

He looked at her and said, "You don't mean it."

"Oh yes," she said. "You better believe I do."

He started to laugh from the bottom of his big gut until his laugh came out and filled the room. When he'd calmed down, he wiped his eyes with his E.F. embroidered pocket handkerchief and said, "Hell, Vita, let me see what I can do."

Suddenly Hamm's $150 million road-improvement bond, stalemated for almost three years, passed both houses, and Earl got a few things he wanted. But not many. As Vita wisely told Hamm, "Darling, some people in this world are either at your throat or at your feet. Best to keep him at your feet."

IN ALL the time Vita and Hamm were together, there had only been one conversation that came close to being an argument. Early on, Hamm talked about getting a divorce, but she nipped that idea

in the bud. "Absolutely not. You are not going to ruin your political future over me. Besides, I don't want to get married. I'm a grown woman, and I want exactly what I've got. If this is some sort of guilt over me, forget it. I don't want children. I have no interest whatsoever in being a mother or a stepmother."

"But Vita," he said, "I do feel bad."

She took his face in her hands. "Darling, I know how you feel about me. You don't need to wreck your life to prove it. What we have together is just between us. We are not hurting anyone."

Of course, Vita did not know it as yet, but her affair with Hamm was hurting someone in ways that at this point were subtle.

OUTWARDLY, to Betty Raye, Hamm seemed the same. But being with Vita had changed him and the way he looked at the world and Betty Raye. He still loved her—but differently. No matter what he might say, Hamm was caught up in the whirl of Vita's big-money and big-words crowd. Betty Raye tried to stay in touch with him, to be there when he needed her, but he never seemed to need her for anything. Over time, she felt herself slowly beginning to fade away. She began to feel invisible. Even the boys were slipping away. They were both getting to be much more like their father, aggressive and rowdy, and they spent much of their time outside playing ball with the guards. She did not know why, but she began to feel like a stranger living in a house where everyone knew a secret but her.

Which was pretty much the truth. From the beginning, the inside circle knew about Hamm and Vita. The entire staff understood there were unspoken orders to make sure that Vita and the official first lady were never at the same function at the same time.

Betty Raye was now counting the days when they would be out of the governor's mansion at last and into a real home. As per Hamm's instructions, Rodney had driven her past a brand-new red brick house in a nice subdivision outside of town. And later, when she walked into the governor's office, Hamm did not look up but said, "Well, is that what you had in mind?"

"Oh, Hamm, it's more than I could have ever hoped for."

Betty Raye would not miss being first lady, but she would miss a few of the staff: Cecil, of course, and over the years she had grown quite fond of Alberta Peets, the ice-pick murderess. But other than that, she could hardly wait to pack up and get out of the governor's mansion for good.

Hamm tried to resign himself to the fact that he was going out of office, but as the May primaries grew closer, the more restless he became. While Betty Raye and Cecil shopped for furniture for the new house, Hamm bellyached to anyone who would listen about the fact that a governor could not run for a third consecutive term. "I need at least four more years to finish what I started, and now Earl is gonna bring in that idiot Carnie Boofer and wreck it all."

HAMM was in his office having a few drinks with the guys one evening, when Hamm junior ran in and asked for more quarters to put in the pinball machine in the basement. When he left, Hamm asked Wendell, "What's the age limit on running for governor? If Hamm junior's old enough, I'll run him."

Wendell grinned. "Damn, next you'll be trying to run your wife."

They all laughed except Hamm, who sat with a glazed expression, staring into space. Then he looked at Wendell. "Why not?"

"Why not what?"

"Run my wife."

"Oh, hell, Hamm, I was just kidding."

"Is there a law against it?"

"No, but you can't do that."

"Why not? It would be almost the same as voting for me, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, but nobody is gonna vote for a woman."

"Why not?"

Seymour Gravel asked Wendell, "Yeah, why not?"

An hour later, after a heated debate over why not, Hamm said, "Excuse me a minute, will you, boys?" and went into the other room to make a call.

Vita laughed with delight when she heard what he was thinking.

"It's a completely insane idea, Hamm, but it would be worth it just to see the look on Earl's face when you announced it."

"So, Vita—should I do it?"

"Why not?" she said.

He came back into the office, sat down, and said, "I think we should do it." After he got everyone to agree, Hamm pushed a button on the phone and said in a syrupy voice, "Betty Raye, could you come down here for a minute?"

They heard her answer over the speakerphone: "Hamm, I'm already in my nightgown."

"That's all right, honey. Put your robe on. I need to talk to you."

Rodney looked grim. "She ain't gonna go along with this."

Hamm said, "Yes, she will. But now, you boys have got to help me out here, make her see how it's our only chance."

When Betty Raye—wearing her robe and the big fuzzy pink bunny slippers that Ferris, her youngest, had given her for Christmas—opened the door, she was startled to see a room full of men. She clutched at her robe. "Oh, I didn't know you had people here."

"That's all right. Come on in, Betty Raye," said the spider to the fly.

AN HOUR later they were upstairs in the bedroom, and Betty Raye was crying. "How could you do this? You gave me your word this was the last time."

"I know I did, honey, but you heard what the boys said. I've got to finish what I started. I owe it to the folks that voted for me."

"Oh, but Hamm, the whole thing is ridiculous. I don't know anything about politics, much less how to be a governor."

"You wouldn't really be the governor. You'd just be standing in for me."

She went over to the dresser to get another Kleenex. "And that's another thing. I don't want to be involved in something dishonest."

"Honey, it's not dishonest. People will know they're voting for me. And people will thank you. You know how high my ratings are. They would vote for me anyway if it were not for that stupid law. You're doing everybody a favor." He sat down on the bed. "Betty

Raye, I'm ashamed to tell you this, but I haven't been completely honest with you. I was seriously thinking of running again in '68. But now I know it would be too late. If I don't hang in there now, while I still have a foothold, all the sweat and sacrifice will be for nothing. You're the only hope I have. Do you think I've enjoyed being away from you and the children so much? No. But if you stick with me one more time—"

"Hamm, don't. I've heard that before."

"I know, but—and I mean this—if you will do this, I swear on my life, on my children's life, that I will never run for governor again."

Another hour of Betty Raye crying, with Hamm pleading, went by, and Betty Raye was beginning to weaken.

"Hamm, please don't make me do this. I'll just die if I have to get up there and make speeches."

"You won't have to do a thing—just stand up, introduce me, and sit down. Other than that, everything will be the same as always, only this time you and I will be together twenty-four hours a day. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, you know I would, but—"

"It's just four little years, and then I can leave knowing I've done the best job I could, and we'd be done with politics forever."

She swallowed hard. "Are you sure it's the only way?"

"You heard what Wendell said. If you don't do it, the whole state will suffer."

She teared up again. "But what about my house? I bought so many nice things. It was going to be so pretty."

"I'll tell you what. You can keep the house. And you and Cecil can decorate to your heart's content. What do you say? Will you do this one last thing for me?"

She looked at him. "No speeches?"

"None."

She moaned. "Oh God, Hamm, I can't believe I'm letting you talk me into this. But if it's really for the good of the state . . ."

And so at 2:34 a.m. the woman in pink fuzzy bunny slippers agreed to run for governor.

EARL FINLEY CALLED VITA, screaming at the top of his lungs. "That man promised me he would support Boofer. We had a deal, and now he's harpooned me in the back. You tell that sorry son of a bitch that I'll get him if it's the last thing I ever do."

"I'll tell him, Earl," Vita said.

"I could kill him with my bare hands."

"I know how you must feel. Believe me, I was shocked. Just shocked when I heard." Vita put the phone down, smiling. To hear a man who had done nothing all his life but pull one dirty deal after another so incensed and outraged when it happened to him was highly amusing.

Minnie Oatman was in Pine Mountain, Georgia, at a Singing on the Mountain, when she heard the news. She had just finished doing her new hit, "I Love to Tell the Story," when someone came running out onstage and handed her a note. She then threw her hands up in the air and called out to the boys, *"Praise Jesus. Your sister is gonna be governor!"*

OF COURSE there were a few obstacles. When it was announced to the public that Hamm was running his wife, the news was met with mixed reactions. The people who were for him laughed and winked at each other, tickled that their man had pulled one over the big shots. The rest were furious.

And some men would never vote for a woman, even if she was just a surrogate candidate. Stand-in or not, she was still a female. But the majority of Democrats came through, and Betty Raye won the primaries without a problem. Then came the Republicans. Their candidate was careful not to attack Betty Raye, and he went after Hamm, but one of his top aides was overheard saying something snide about Betty Raye's backwoods gospel-singing beginnings, and the newspapers printed it. It was just the thing Hamm had been waiting for. He jumped all over it. "My wife and I, unlike our honorable Republican opponent, are not ashamed of being God-fearing Christians. And I'm proud to be the son-in-law of such a fine woman as Minnie Oatman."

ON THE MORNING AFTER THE election almost everyone had their television sets on.

"Well, it's ladies' day in Missouri this morning," said a smiling Barbara Walters on the NBC *Today* show. The male cohost snorted slightly, then caught himself and added his congratulations to the new Governor Sparks.

How she had let Hamm talk her into this charade was still a mystery to Betty Raye, but she had, and now she was trapped. She couldn't go back if she wanted to.

And so on inauguration day, as much as she dreaded it, she went through the necessary motions of being sworn in and posing for pictures, and although her hands and her knees were shaking, she read the short speech they had written out: "Ladies and gentlemen, it is with the utmost humility that I accept this office today. And with your support and the help of my husband and number one adviser, I promise to carry out my duties as your new governor to the very best of my abilities, so help me God."

Cecil then signaled the band to start up, and she and Hamm walked down the avenue to the governor's mansion on the coldest day of the year, the streets lined with well-wishers.

When she arrived back at the mansion, Betty Raye saw a familiar face at the top of the stairs. "Welcome home, Governor Betty," said Alberta Peets, the ice-pick murderess. Betty Raye was never so glad to see anyone in her life.

IN 1966 BETTY Raye was relieved to learn that there was another wife running for a governorship. Lurleen Wallace of Alabama had announced her candidacy. Betty Raye prayed that Lurleen would win, so she would not have to be the lone woman governor in the United States anymore. It was still a shock to her every time she heard the words Governor Betty Raye Sparks of Missouri.

Then she got another shock when, out of the blue, Hamm announced he was running for President. The unexpected decision caught everyone off guard, but no one more than Betty Raye. He had not discussed anything with her. As usual, she had no idea he

was going to do it until he did it. And almost overnight he was off and running, starting to campaign all over the country, and she was left in the lurch. Wendell helped her as much as possible, but more and more Hamm dragged Wendell and the rest of the staff off with him, leaving her alone for days at a time. Consequently, Betty Raye wound up trying to run the state by herself, a job she'd never wanted and did not know how to do.

Terrified that she would make a mistake, she stayed up until three and four o'clock in the morning, poring through books, trying desperately to learn as fast as possible how state government worked. A few people may have been surprised when their bond issue passed and was signed with the advice received from Alberta Peets, who had been there and knew what she was talking about. She told Betty Raye she thought an appropriation of $15 million for the restoration of the Mabel Dodge Prison for Women was a fine idea.

Suddenly Betty Raye had to take a hard look at what was really going on in the state. Paving roads and promoting business and building bridges were fine, but she began to see a lot of little things that were wrong that Hamm had been too busy to be bothered with. She began to read all the letters addressed to the governor from women across the state, and she found herself deeply moved by their problems—women whose husbands had either died or had left them with no way of making a living. Some had even had to give up their children. Old women who had worked all their lives and wound up penniless. Hundreds of letters poured in, their writers hoping that because she was a woman, she would understand.

One morning she walked into the governor's office, picked up the nameplate on the desk that read GOVERNOR HAMM SPARKS, looked at it, then quietly opened a drawer and put it in.

HAMM called Vita from Detroit as excited as she had ever heard him. He had just spoken to five thousand members of the Teamsters Union. "I can win this thing, Vita."

Hamm had been campaigning nationally for just a few months, but not only was he popular in the rural areas, as was expected, but

to everyone's surprise he was already starting to draw huge crowds in Chicago, Newark, and Pittsburgh. He had hit a nerve, or as one columnist put it, he had tapped into a gold mine of unrest in the country, and he was the only candidate who was "telling it like it is," saying publicly what they were thinking privately. Almost everyone was frustrated with the way the war in Vietnam was going, and people were shocked at the lack of respect the protesters had for American soldiers fighting in Vietnam.

There was racial unrest everywhere, and uneasiness about the rise of crime, drugs, and gangs in the cities. Preachers across the country were becoming alarmed about young people's apathy and lack of morals. Some blamed television. As the Reverend W. W. Nails put it, "The devil has three initials: ABC, NBC, and CBS. They love Lucy more than they do the Lord, and they would rather leave it to Beaver than to Jesus." Average Americans who worked hard every day, who were not criminals, not on welfare, and seldom complained, suddenly started showing signs of disillusionment. They were tired of paying to support half the world while they struggled to make ends meet. But most of all, they were scared. They looked around and saw the bright and shining true-blue America they had known growing up beginning to tarnish, tear, and fall apart at the seams. Hamm Sparks knew exactly how to verbalize their fears.

Soon Hamm came down with a full-blown case of Washington fever, and he started doing anything he thought could get him into the White House. He made deals with people he should not have, said things that were more and more outrageous. Vita told him to be careful. Betty Raye begged him to come home. But it was like trying to stop a moving train. He was not a bad man, just recklessly ambitious. When a woman at the John Birch Society luncheon gushed that she thought Hamm was the only man who could save America, Wendell Hewitt said, "That's fine if she believes it. But when Hamm starts believing it, we are in big trouble."

HAMM "Tell It Like It Is" Sparks was becoming a big thorn in the side of a lot of people. Once more, he was making powerful

enemies in his own party, only this time on a national level. His backwoods manner was an embarrassment to the elite East Coast pipe-and-tweed Democrats, who tried to get him to step down, but Hamm was like a dog with a bone. He would not withdraw, and if they threw him out, they knew he might run on an independent ticket and take the votes with him.

The Republicans, too, were worried about Hamm. To their utmost irritation, he was receiving thousands of dollars from a lot of big money supporters that should have been going to their man.

On December 31 Dorothy's New Year's resolution was the same as last year: Lose ten pounds.

On December 31 Minnie Oatman sat down at the small table on the big silver bus that was headed for a New Year's Day gospel sing in Bloomington, Illinois, and wrote out her same old resolution: Lose fifty pounds.

But across the country, a new resolution appeared on the top of a lot of people's lists: Get rid of Hamm Sparks.

They did not write it down, but they thought it.

SOME of the people who supported Hamm financially did not want it known. And there were some he was willing to take money from who *he* did not want known.

Rodney Tillman was contacted by Anthony Leo—the man who had given Hamm *The Betty Raye* eight years before—and was told there was a friend of his in New Orleans who might be willing to contribute a lot of money under the table. But he wanted to talk to Hamm about who he was considering for Vice President before he committed.

Hamm agreed to meet on the man's yacht in New Orleans. When the time was right, Hamm blocked out a weekend, and that Friday morning he called Betty Raye from Jackson, Mississippi, to inform her that he would not be coming home to Jefferson City because he and the boys had decided to go on a hunting trip. Wendell Hewitt and Seymour Gravel told their wives the same thing. It was not too much of a lie. They were hunting for money.

Since the press was dogging Hamm's every move, the trip to New Orleans had to be carefully coordinated. After much plotting and map studying, Rodney came up with the plan. Since Hamm was already in Jackson for a speech, Rodney would go back to Missouri, pick up *The Betty Raye,* meet them near the Mississippi-Louisiana state line at the boathouse of a relative of Mr. Leo's, and then take them on to New Orleans via the Mississippi River. In order for them to avoid being seen, Cecil Figgs was to pick them up at the motel at four a.m. in an old hearse he would borrow from the back lot of one of his Kansas City mortuaries and drive them down to meet Rodney at the boat. The plan worked. They stashed the hearse in the bushes about a half mile from the spot on the river and walked the rest of the way. When they were all aboard *The Betty Raye,* they laughed all the way down the Mississippi, thinking how clever they had been.

Cecil had no idea what the meeting was about, nor did he care. He was just along for the ride. When they pulled into the dock in New Orleans and tied up beside the seventy-five-foot yacht where the meeting with Mr. Leo's friend was to take place, Cecil made plans of his own in the French Quarter.

BY TUESDAY morning every headline in America screamed the same thing: HAMM SPARKS, FOUR OTHERS MISSING: FOUL PLAY SUSPECTED.

By Tuesday afternoon there were dozens of newsmen and television cameras on the front lawn of the governor's mansion, with more on the way. David Brinkley's lead on the NBC nightly news was, "Controversial presidential candidate Hamm Sparks, along with four other men, including Wendell Hewitt, the Missouri attorney general, disappeared over the weekend. The question is, Where did they go?"

It was a genuine mystery. The last time any of the men had been seen was Friday night. Monday morning none of them had shown up where they were supposed to be. Hamm had been scheduled to address AFL-CIO members in Grand Rapids, and Cecil was to

have taken his mother to the eye doctor. Something was seriously wrong. The FBI questioned everyone for days.

And everyone, including Betty Raye, was at a loss as to what to do. It seemed inconceivable that five grown men could just disappear into thin air without leaving a trace. Jake Spurling, the FBI's number one missing-persons expert, was brought in from Washington and put on the case. All of Hamm's known enemies, of which there were many, were immediately questioned, but none could be connected to the disappearance.

A few days after the headlines hit, an extremely nervous Anthony Leo made a call from a phone booth to his friend in New Orleans. The friend claimed not to know what had happened to the men after the meeting and in turn asked Mr. Leo if he knew anything. Mr. Leo said no. They both wondered if the other was lying.

Betty Raye could not sleep or eat. Not knowing if Hamm was dead or alive was torture, but in addition to grieving for her husband, she had two children and an entire state to worry about.

A month later, after attending a rather strange and ambiguous memorial service for Hamm and the four men, it hit her that most likely Hamm was not coming back. And she wanted to die. Had it not been for her two boys, she might have.

AS THE widow of such a powerful man, Betty Raye had at least received the nation's sympathy. Vita Green suffered alone. Out of respect for his family, she did not attend the memorial service, but stayed home and held her own very private wake. The people who knew about her relationship with Hamm tried to be helpful, but as Betty Raye had learned, nothing could help except, maybe, time.

Time and patience were two things Jake Spurling had plenty of. An unattractive man with red, pockmarked skin, Jake was as dedicated to solving missing-persons cases as most men were to their families. Though there had been a memorial service, none of the bodies had been found, and as far as Jake Spurling was concerned, the case was far from over. He vowed he would never give up on the Hamm Sparks disappearance. To Jake this was the case of a lifetime.

IT WAS SOME TIME AFTER THE memorial service before Betty Raye got up the nerve to do something she had wanted to do for a long time. She asked state trooper Ralph Childress to let her out a half block away, and when she reached the front of the building in Kansas City, a uniformed doorman tipped his hat, saying, "May I help you, ma'am?"

She fumbled in her purse. "Uh, I'm here to see Mrs. Vita Green?"

"Yes, ma'am. Who shall I say is calling?"

Betty Raye, who was wearing a scarf and sunglasses, panicked. She had not realized she would be announced. She said almost inaudibly, "Tell her it's Mrs. Sparks."

"Yes, ma'am." He pushed a button. "Mrs. Green, I have a Mrs. Sparks here to see you." There was a pause. He repeated the name, and there was another long interval. Betty Raye's heart was pounding so hard she wanted to run. After a moment he hung up and said, "Go right in. Take the elevator up to fourteen, get off, and take a left up the stairs. Turn right, and you will see 15A."

As Betty Raye got off the elevator, she removed the scarf and sunglasses and then walked up the stairs. When she reached the door, she pushed the buzzer to the apartment, and the noise made her jump. After a moment the door opened.

Vita was as smooth as silk when she saw the wife of the man who had been the love of her life. "Governor Sparks, won't you come in?"

Betty Raye's knees were weak as she stepped into the living room. The entire apartment had a faint scent of Shalimar perfume, a familiar smell. Hamm always had the aroma on him.

"Have a seat, Governor. May I offer you coffee, tea?"

"Oh no, thank you."

After they sat, Vita said, "I'm sure you know how sorry I and all of us on the arts council are for your loss."

Betty Raye nodded. "Yes. I appreciated your note and flowers."

There was an uncomfortable silence. They sat looking at each other. Finally Betty Raye spoke. "Mrs. Green, I thought I had a reason to come here, but right now I can't remember what it was. I feel like a fool. All I've done, I'm afraid, is to embarrass myself. I thought

you might need someone to talk to, someone who— Well, I guess the thing I wondered about was if you were all right, or if you needed anything. I know how fond you were of my husband and how fond he was of you—how much he depended on you—for advice and things. You were not at the memorial service, and I think I know why." At that point Betty Raye hiccuped. "Oh, I'm sorry. I thought how hard that must have been on you not to have—" She hiccuped again. "Well, that's great. I've got the hiccups."

Vita stood up. "Let me get you some water." She went into the kitchen while Betty Raye sat on her couch hiccuping.

When Vita returned and handed her the water, Betty Raye said, "Thank you," took a big sip, and spilled water down the front of her dress. "Oh dear. This is not how I planned this to be. I wanted—" She hiccuped again. "I'm sorry. I just wanted to do what Hamm might have wanted someone to do. I better leave." When she reached the door, she hiccuped again and went out and closed the door.

Vita sat there for a moment listening to Betty Raye hiccup down the hall, then got up and thought to herself, I'm probably going to regret this. She got to the elevator doors just as they opened and took Betty Raye by the arm. "Come back."

Betty Raye said, "No. . . . I should just go and let you alone."

"I don't want you to go." Vita led her back to the apartment. When she got her back inside, she sat her down and handed her a glass of brandy. "Drink this."

Betty Raye took a sip and looked at Vita in horror. "What is that?"

"Brandy."

"Oh well. I thought I'd come here today because I wanted you to know if there was anything I could do for you . . . I realize you must miss him terribly." She paused a moment, then said, "But I did have a question. Mrs. Green, I hate to ask you this, but do you have any idea what happened to him?"

"No, I don't, Mrs. Sparks. I wish I did. Believe me."

"Oh. I thought if anyone knew, it would be you."

Vita looked at her very carefully. "Did you know about your husband and me?"

"Oh yes."

"For how long?"

"From the beginning. Hamm was not the subtlest of men."

"And you never said anything?"

"No. But please don't think I'm a saint. I'm not. It nearly killed me. But you can't make a person stop loving another person just by telling them to stop. Oh, I thought about leaving him, and I should have, I guess. But I knew a divorce would have ruined his career, so I made the decision not to leave, and I adjusted to it." She looked at the brandy glass. "I think this stuff has cured my hiccups. And of course, I hoped he would get over you. But I think the real truth is I just didn't have the courage to leave. I'm not a very brave person, Mrs. Green, and the thought of having to go out on my own and raise the children alone . . ." Betty Raye took another drink of the brandy. She knew she should leave. There was nothing more to say. But for some reason she was unable to move. She kept looking at Vita as if she did have something more to say, but she did not know what it was.

Vita wondered what was the matter with her, just sitting there looking so troubled. And then a thought occurred. She leaned over and took Betty Raye's hand and looked her in the eyes. "Mrs. Sparks, do you need help?"

A relieved Betty Raye blurted out, "Oh God, yes. Yes, I do. Without Hamm I'm scared to death. I know how smart you are and how much he depended on you. Oh, Mrs. Green, would you consider being my adviser?"

"First of all, it's Vita, and I will be happy to help you in any way I can, Mrs. Sparks."

"Oh, thank you, Vita—and it's Betty Raye, please."

They stood up, and Vita walked her to the door. "So when would you like to get together again? Lunch tomorrow, say around one?"

"To tell you the truth, Vita, I don't think I can wait that long," Betty Raye said. "How about breakfast, say around eight?"

Vita laughed. "I'll be there." Vita did not usually like women, but this one she liked. This little brown wren had more guts and heart than anyone had suspected. As they walked down the hall, Vita put her arm in Betty Raye's and said, "You know, Betty Raye, I think this might be the beginning of a beautiful relationship."

BETTY Raye did not know it, but she had become friends with Vita Green not a moment too soon.

Earl Finley had quietly done his dirty work behind closed doors, made the right deals and promises to the right people of both parties. He waited, coiled like a snake, until what he deemed a respectable amount of time had passed, and then he struck swiftly. Almost overnight, it seemed, a motion for a recall was put before the Missouri house and senate, stating that Betty Raye had been elected with the expectation and understanding that her husband would run the state, and that expectation was no longer valid. Within twenty-four hours the motion was passed, declaring Betty Raye's governorship null and void. A new election was to take place to determine who would serve out her last two years in office.

And Carnie Boofer, who had been sitting in the wings waiting, was poised and ready to go. It was all done with the best of intentions, so everyone—or almost everyone—said. The motion had been passed to relieve a nice lady from an impossible situation so she could leave office and step down gracefully and with dignity. Betty Raye received a lovely letter from the speaker of the house thanking her for her valiant service for the past two years and stating that although she was no longer the legal governor, as a courtesy, she and the boys would be allowed to remain living at the mansion until the election was over. They even voted to allot her a lifetime pension of $10,000 a year.

Vita thought it was a lousy trick, but agreed that in the long run it was probably for the best. She did not tell Betty Raye this, but knowing Earl Finley as well as she did and how dangerous he could be, she understood his methods all too well. If he wanted someone out of office, he would stop at nothing. Vita still had her suspicions

about his involvement in Hamm's disappearance, but so far, all Jake Spurling had come up with was that Finley and his cohorts had air-tight alibis. But then they always did.

IT NEVER occurred to anyone, not even Betty Raye, that she would not step down. At first, after the surprise of the thing, she was relieved. Now, finally, she could move into her own house. But as she and Alberta Peets started packing up, something slowly began to dawn on her. In essence, despite all the niceties, what the state politicians, led by Earl Finley, had said was, "Here's your hat, and don't let the door hit you on your way out." She called Vita in Kansas City. "Vita, I've been thinking. We don't know for sure who was responsible for getting rid of Hamm, but if it was any of the same people who are trying to get rid of me, I don't think they should get away with it. Not without a fight, at least."

Vita sat up and paid attention. "What can you do?"

"Well, if they say the last election was null and void, I'll run again on my own."

"Do you know what you are up against?" Vita said.

"No, I don't."

"Well, I do. I know these people, and they play rough."

"What more can they do other than kill me? I know I probably won't win, but I think I owe it to Hamm to at least try, don't you?"

Vita smiled. "It would be fun. To see Earl's face."

"Can you come back up here tomorrow so we can talk some more about it?"

"I guess so. But just to talk. I'll be there for lunch."

There was a pause on the other end.

"Oh, *all right* . . . make it breakfast."

THEY say people two blocks away heard Earl Finley yelling when he heard the news. He vowed he was not going to take it sitting down. As head of the Missouri Democratic Party, he declared Betty Raye's candidacy invalid and refused to support her. This forced her to run as an independent.

Le Roy Oatman and the Missouri Plowboys geared up one more time. From the first, Betty Raye's polling numbers were so low they set a state record. As hard as she tried, she was still so shy that when she got up to speak, everyone could see her knees shaking. And if there were men who would not vote for a woman even when she had Hamm behind her, almost none would vote for a woman without any man behind her.

Carnie Boofer and the rest of the candidates ignored her at first, but as time went by, Carnie could not resist taking a swipe at her. He ended his first paid-for television address by saying, "I am sure Mrs. Sparks is a lovely lady, but I must point out that this ex–gospel singer and one-time cafeteria worker with barely a high school education is sorely ill-equipped to run a state. Mrs. Sparks needs to be home where she belongs, looking after her children, and to leave the business of politics to the men. After all, there was no such thing as founding mothers, only founding fathers. Betsy Ross stayed home and sewed the flag. I suggest that Mrs. Sparks take up knitting, and I'll make a deal with her. If she won't run, I won't knit."

Boofer got a lot of laughs. But not from the women.

In fact, it made Neighbor Dorothy mad. The next morning, after her nine-out-of-ten-movie-stars-use-Lux-Soap commercial, she broke with all convention and went out on a limb.

"You know, we never delve into controversy here on our show, but darn it all—and please excuse my French over the radio—I, for one, am tired of some men (and you know who they are) going on about how a woman should stay home and take care of her family. Now, you know I am not against that. I am a homemaker myself. But these men have got to realize that times have changed."

Mother Smith broke into a rousing rendition of "How You Gonna Keep 'Em Down on the Farm After They've Seen Paree."

"That's right, Mother Smith. Men have got to realize they did not win the war all by themselves, for heaven's sake. During the war we all worked in factories, ran the trains, joined the army, did everything the men did. Our own Ada Goodnight flew planes. When it was over, the men came home and wanted everything to go back to

the way it was. But once people find out they can do a thing and like to do things, it's not right to tell them they can't. I think we need to let them know how we feel, don't you? We women fought too long to get the vote to be told we shouldn't vote for one of our own.

"As you all may know, we were lucky enough to have Betty Raye stay with us, and let me tell you this—anybody that could get Bobby Smith to read thirty-four books in one summer can certainly run a state! And that's all I'll say on the subject."

In truth, not many women had been interested in politics until Neighbor Dorothy's call to arms, but the day after her broadcast, letters began pouring into the Democratic headquarters, complaining about Carnie Boofer. The politicians had crossed the wrong bunch this time. They had hit a big, mad hornets' nest with a rock.

But perhaps the strongest message was a telegram sent to Missouri Democratic headquarters by one man whose mother and his wife, Bess, were faithful *Neighbor Dorothy Show* listeners. A man with, you might say, a lot of influence. The telegram simply said:

LET THE LITTLE LADY RUN! HARRY S. TRUMAN

Earl Finley was in a fit. Not only was Truman on her side, but public sentiment was running higher and higher against them. At the end of the day they had no choice but to dump Carnie Boofer and let the little lady run.

The big push was on, and the other candidates pushed back, making the same mistake Carnie Boofer had. When one man said, "All she has to offer the state is a Kitchen Cabinet," the national press picked it up, and telegrams started pouring in—from everyone from Mamie Eisenhower to Ginger Rogers.

Women started to listen and read what Betty Raye had to say about how, if elected, she would not only continue her late husband's policies but also implement new ones of her own, of interest to them. She promised to introduce state laws forcing state moneys to be spent on facilities for women and girls as well as the males. She talked about the inequities of the women's salaries compared to

the men's—subjects that they had never heard another candidate speak about—and they liked what they heard.

The widows of the men who had disappeared with Hamm—Mrs. Seymour Gravel and Mrs. Wendell Hewitt, and even the former Mrs. Rodney Tillman—went on the campaign trail to try to help Betty Raye, and Mrs. Ursa Figgs, mother of the late Cecil Figgs, despite being a lifelong Republican, donated a great deal of money to the cause. Money came in from hundreds of pancake suppers and bake sales, and a lot of poor farm women just sent in their egg money, but it added up. The men were now threatened and really started to go after Betty Raye with the most vicious attacks yet.

Finally Minnie Oatman had had enough. She went to the phone on the wall outside the dressing room in Columbus, Mississippi, and dialed. "Elvis," she said, "it's Minnie Oatman."

"Oh yes, ma'am," he said, happy to hear from her. "How are you?"

"Honey, my girl Betty Raye is running for governor of the state of Missouri, and they is beating up on her pretty bad. I need you to make a personal appearance at one of her rallies. Could you do that for me?"

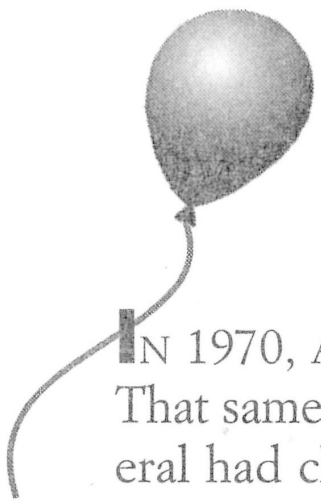
"Yes, ma'am. I'd be glad to. Just tell me when and where you want me. I'll be there."

Although he made his money on rock and roll, Elvis loved gospel, and Mrs. Gladys Presley, his mother, was Minnie's biggest fan. Minnie had always been nice to his mother and his daddy, Vernon. That went a long way with Elvis. He would be there even if he had to cancel something else to do it.

As for Betty Raye herself, as time went by, she became more sure of herself. Vita knew Betty Raye had turned a corner when, speaking in Clark County, she remarked to the crowd, "You know, I have a special place in my heart for Clark County. My late husband and I spent our honeymoon a few miles down the road . . . so you might say Hamm junior got his start right here."

Hamm junior, who was sitting behind her, turned beet red, but she did receive 78 percent of the Clark County vote.

ON THE MORNING AFTER the special election Neighbor Dorothy did her show as usual. Before she signed off, she said without fanfare, "Well, congratulations to our brand-new governor. We always feel sorry for the other fellow that loses, but as they say, may the best man win. Only from now on, we might have to say, may the best *person* win. This is Neighbor Dorothy with Mother Smith on the organ, saying, have a nice day."



The Seventies

IN 1970, AFTER a long illness, the Smith family lost Mother Smith. That same year, Bobby and Lois had another boy. The world in general had changed very little, except that a man had walked on the moon, and everyone in Elmwood Springs was elated that America had done it first.

After Betty Raye was elected for her second term as governor, the first thing she did was to appoint Vita Green as the state's first female lieutenant governor. So unbeknownst to most people, Hamm's wife and mistress wound up pretty much running the state. They had the help of Peter Wheeler and other smart people who were brought into the administration. Alberta Peets, what with the murder and all, could not serve officially, but she did get an early pardon and stayed on as Betty Raye's private secretary. Earl Finley said he would not live to see the end of the Hamm Sparks era, and he was right. He had a stroke in 1969.

As for the mystery of what had happened to Hamm, Jake Spurling had far from given up. In January 1970 there was a break in the case. When he received a call about an abandoned hearse down in Louisiana, Jake ordered it and the entire area cordoned off. Some kids had found it in the woods. It was rusty, and the upholstery was ripped with age. He had his men go over it from top to bottom. The hearse, an older model, was traced back to the Cecil Figgs Mortu-

aries car lot in Kansas City. Jake flew in and walked around the area, but there was nothing there except an old falling-down boat dock.

Curious about who it belonged to, Jake had it traced. The owner of the boat dock in 1967 was Mr. Buddy Leo, uncle of Anthony Leo of Kansas City, a man with ties to organized crime. Unfortunately, neither Mr. Leo was available for questioning. The uncle had died of old age, and Mr. Anthony Leo had accidentally stepped in front of five rapidly speeding bullets, which had proved to be fatal.

NORMA Warren was getting ready to have her daughter leave home for the first time, and she was not at all happy about it. When Linda, a pretty girl with reddish-blond hair, graduated from high school, she immediately went to work for AT&T. On career day the representatives had come to school trying to recruit women, in particular, for management training. They needed a quota of women now that the federal and the state governments were paying attention. Aunt Elner's niece by marriage, Mary Grace, had a good job at the telephone company in St. Louis and put in a good word for Linda. When she was chosen, Norma was disappointed. "I wish you'd think about going to college for at least two years. I wish I hadn't gotten married so young. I wish I had gone to college."

"I know, Mother, but think about the great opportunity this is. I'm going to be trained for a top job. Why waste four years in college when I can already be working and making good money?"

"You're too young to be so practical. You must get that from your daddy. Besides, I was hoping you would be a little closer to home."

"Aha," said Linda, "so that's what is really worrying you."

"Why shouldn't it? I'm a normal mother."

"But you don't have to worry. I'll be fine."

"Do you think I am going to let you go up to some big city full of white slavers and not worry?"

"Oh, Mother, there aren't any white slavers in San Francisco."

"You don't know. I look at television. Barbara Walters just had a piece about some Russian girls mixed up with white slavers." Tears welled up in her eyes.

"Mother."

"I hope you know I won't sleep for the next four years!"

An hour later Linda called Macky. "Daddy, you're going to have to talk to Mother. She's having a fit about me getting kidnapped by white slavers."

Macky said, "I figured as much. Has she said anything about earthquakes yet?"

"No, but I'm sure it will be next."

Later that night Norma sat in the kitchen with Macky. "I just don't know what's wrong with those people at the telephone company. Expecting a young girl to go all the way to San Francisco all by herself."

"She's going to be with a whole bunch of people her age that will be in training with her."

Norma's eyes blinked wide open. "San Francisco! Oh my God, what about earthquakes!"

Macky got up and poured himself another cup of coffee. It was going to be a long night.

ONE morning in 1974 Dorothy announced to her radio listeners that this was her last week on the air. "It's going to be hard not to come to the microphone every morning for our visit, but it's been a long run. Thirty-six years of broadcasting is more than I could have hoped for.

"As most of you know, Doc is retiring this month, and we are looking forward to doing some traveling. We don't have much money and are not rich in material things, but as I reread the letters you have sent me throughout the years, I am as wealthy as a millionaire. We still have a week to go, so I won't say good-bye. I'll just say until tomorrow, this is Neighbor Dorothy coming to you from 5348 First Avenue North in Elmwood Springs, Missouri. Where you are always welcome. Have a nice day."

DOC had been at the drugstore training the young pharmacist who was taking his place, when the prescription was called in. The

minute he saw who the heart medicine was for, he went home. They never did travel. It was a warm autumn that year, so they spent some of the days sitting in the Sweetheart Swing out back and watching the sun go down.

On October 22 a tall, thin radio announcer walked into a booth, looked up at the clock, and waited. At exactly 9:30, instead of the *Top in Pops* show, which usually aired after the news, a surprised listening audience heard, "Ladies and gentlemen, station WDOT is sad to report that a friend is dead. Last evening Neighbor Dorothy passed away quietly in her home in Elmwood Springs. We wish to extend our deepest sympathies to her family and to the hundreds of radio listeners who came to know and love her over the years. In remembrance, station WDOT will be off the air for one hour in silent tribute to a woman who will be missed by all.

"We would like to close with this thought. What is a life? The best and most noble life is lived in such a way that it can be said of a person that while she was here, she brought love and joy and comfort to all she touched. Such was the life lived by the woman known to all as Neighbor Dorothy. Although her voice here on earth has been silenced, we would like to think that somewhere, in another place, people are just now turning on their radios and hearing her for the very first time. Good-bye, dear friend."

The Eighties

FOR all the years and hours that Norma had spent worrying over every little thing, the moment something really terrible did happen, she was the one who was calm. She had not said a word to Macky. All he knew was that she had gone in for her yearly checkup. She did not tell him anything until two weeks later. That night after dinner, after she put the dishes in the dishwasher and turned off the kitchen light, she sat down next to Macky in the family room.

"Macky, I'm sure it's nothing, but they saw a little something on my mammogram, and Dr. Halling wants to do a biopsy."

Macky felt the blood drain from his body.

She went on. "So I'm going in on Wednesday. I should only be there for a day or so, but anyhow, I'm going to fix a few things and put them in the freezer for you to eat while I'm gone."

Macky finally got his voice. "When did this happen?"

"A few days ago."

"A few days ago—why didn't you tell me?"

"Because there was no point for you to worry. The only reason I'm telling you now is because they might keep me overnight, depending on what they find, and I didn't want you to come home and wonder where I was."

"Have you told Linda? Is she coming home?"

"No. Like I said, there is no point to telling anybody anything until we know what it is, and it's probably not anything at all."

"Why would you keep something like this from me? I'm your husband, for God's sake. You don't just say, 'Oh by the way, I think I might have cancer.' "

The minute he said it, he was sorry. But Norma pushed his hair off his forehead and patted his shoulder. "Honey, I don't have cancer."

"But you could have."

After they went to bed, he could not sleep, and he got up at about three in the morning and walked out to the backyard. Tears ran down his cheeks. Not so much because he was scared to death, but because it was her bravery that had always touched him more than he could tell her.

The next few days were pure hell. He realized that if he lost her, he would never forgive himself. He wanted more years with her, so he could wake up every day and look at her and appreciate who she was—his wife, his lover, the mother of his child, but most of all, his best friend.

He sat in the waiting room of the hospital, and while they were doing the biopsy on Norma, he thought about time. When he was a child, it had seemed so long from Christmas Eve night to Christ-

mas morning. Now, in just a few seconds, the doctor would tell them the results. In those few seconds his life would never again be the same—or they would have another chance. Did the white-coated people in the lab know what they were looking at? He wanted to yell at the entire hospital, *That's my wife, that's my entire life, our entire future you're looking at.*

Finally the doctor came down the hall. "Mr. Warren," he said, "we got the report from the lab, and it's absolutely benign, so we're gonna close her on up. She should be out of recovery in a few hours."

Macky felt as if he could breathe again, and at that moment he made a deal with himself. Anything that woman wants from now on, she gets. When he asked her the next year where she wanted to go for a vacation, she said, "Well, there is one place I have been dying to go to, but I don't know if you will want to."

"Norma, I told you we will go anywhere you want."

"I've always wanted to go to Las Vegas and see Wayne Newton in concert."

He would have gone to the moon had she wanted.

AFTER her second term as governor, Betty Raye Sparks retired from politics and spent most of her time doing what she had wanted to do all her life. She stayed home and gardened. In 1984 Hamm junior ran for governor and won. People say they heard Earl Finley turning over in his grave.

BOBBY Smith had flown to New York for a round of business meetings. Fowler Poultry was in the process of merging with another, bigger company. On the third night, when he came back to his hotel, Bobby picked up the message Lois had left for him: "Your friend Monroe Newberry passed away. Funeral is Wednesday at 2. Call me."

He went up to his room, sat down, and called her. Thank God for Lois. She had arranged everything with their travel agent and booked him on a flight from New York to Kansas City, where a rental car was reserved. He could drive to Elmwood Springs. After

Bobby's mother died, Doc had gone to Seattle to live with Anna Lee. Bobby had not been back to Elmwood Springs since his mother's funeral or seen Monroe for years. But he and Monroe always called each other on birthdays and at Christmas just to check in. They always planned to get together. Now it was too late.

In Kansas City, Bobby drove his rental car out onto the new superhighway and thought about things he and Monroe had done together: climbing the water tower, swimming at the Blue Devil, the promise they'd made to call each other in the year 2000.

But time and distance had taken their toll. Bobby had moved up in the world. He had new friends. He and Lois had bought a home in Shaker Heights in Cleveland, where the corporate offices were now located, and had joined the country club. Monroe had stayed at home to manage his wife's father's tire store.

Bobby felt numb. Monroe was only forty-nine years old. He was supposed to have had so many years left. Monroe had been walking down the aisle at the Wal-Mart garden and patio center, looking for a good crabgrass killer, and the next thing he was on the floor, dead of a massive heart attack.

After the graveside service, they went back to the house. It was about five when the get-together was over, and before he left to go back to the airport, Bobby decided to take a walk by his old house. He and Anna Lee had sold it a few years ago, and he was glad to see that it looked just about the same, only much smaller than he remembered. Everything was much smaller. Downtown was just a block long. It had seemed so much bigger, like an entire city, as he remembered it. He stopped in front of the window of the Morgan Brothers department store and wondered how they had managed to get a winter wonderland in that small window. The glass doors to the old Elmwood Theater were chained shut, and a poster of the last movie shown there, in 1968, was dusty inside the glass frame. He stared up at it. God, he thought, the hours he had spent inside that theater. He walked back to his car with a thousand memories flooding his mind.

That time. That place. That feeling. What he would give to find

it again. For the first time, Bobby realized that the thing he missed most in the world was gone forever. He wanted his childhood back. He wanted to go home, walk down the hall, climb into his old bed, and wake up with his future laid out before him on a red carpet. He wondered whatever had become of the Bubble Gum King of 1949. That boy who was going to fly planes, jump freighters to the Orient, and do so many wonderful things.

Nothing too terrible. He had just grown up.

A BAD childhood followed by a happy adulthood is one thing, and a good childhood followed by an unhappy adulthood is another. But for Tot Whooten, a miserable childhood had followed her like a black dog right into an equally miserable adulthood. After a lifetime, day after day, of getting up and taking care of her brothers and sisters, then her own children, a drunken husband, and her parents, she was like the elephant, so exhausted from carrying such a heavy load that she just fell down and couldn't get up. She did not want to get up. Each of her children had been a disappointment. Darlene was on her fourth marriage, and the last time Tot had seen Dwayne junior, he had walked off with her good silver candlesticks—to buy more dope with, she guessed.

Then, after years of putting up with James's drinking and begging him to quit, they found him one day passed out in the back of the garage, sick as a dog from one of his binges. The doctor told him, "If you take one more drink, it will kill you."

That did it. He sobered up and soon was holding down a good job, and the next thing she knew, he was sitting in the living room telling her about some woman he had met in AA. He looked her right in the eye and said, "Tot, for the first time in my life I am really in love." There she sat, after having borne his two children and put up with his drinking for over thirty-two years, and he had the nerve to tell her he was in love for the first time in his life. At that moment it occurred to her why people are driven to murder, and she made a mental note not to support the death penalty.

If she had had the strength, she would have killed him, but she

was unable to move. So she sat and stared while he went on and on about how for the first time since he was a boy, he was able to laugh again. Then he finished off his dissertation on love and second chances and said, "So what do you want to do about it?"

"What do I want to do about it?"

"Yes," he said, and looked at his watch like he was late for an appointment.

"I want you to call that woman and tell her you are already married."

"Oh, now, Tot, be reasonable. Jackie Sue needs me, and you don't."

Tot could not believe her ears. "Jackie Sue Potts? Who's been with every man in this town?"

"Tot, don't say anything. You don't know what a hard life she has had."

"She's had a hard life? I'll tell you one thing. I'll give you a divorce, but you take that woman, and you get as far away from us as you can, because I will not live in the same town and have to see her or you. Do you hear me?"

Tot had felt like a complete fool. Not only was the girl younger than her daughter, but all this time she had been fixing Jackie Sue's hair. She had been doing it so Jackie Sue would look good for a date with Tot's own husband!

Of course, James had not moved, and soon she had to see him and Jackie Sue floating all over town, showing off their new baby. This morning she had finally reached the end of her rope. After a lifetime of caring, struggling, looking for answers, today one had come. Today she simply did not care anymore about anything.

EVERYBODY in town was concerned about Tot. Norma was speaking to her aunt Elner on the phone about it. "I am just worried sick. I drove by, and there was poor Tot out in the back of her house, wandering around all by herself like she didn't have a thing in the world to do. You know, she's quit the church, and she told Darlene not to drop the kids by anymore. I am afraid she's flipped."

Aunt Elner said, "I don't think so, Norma. I went over to see her the other day, and she made perfect sense to me. She's tired, that's all, and she'll either come around or she won't."

Tot's neighbor Verbena tried to help. "You know, Tot," she said, "whenever I get to feeling sorry for myself, I think of poor little Frieda Pushnik."

"Who?"

"Frieda Pushnik. She was born without any arms or legs. I saw her in 1933 at the World's Fair in Chicago. They brought her out on a big red velvet pillow, and here she was, nothing more than just a stump with a head, and she was just as cheerful and pleasant as can be. Just imagine, Tot, if you had to be carried around on a pillow night and day. How would you feel?"

Tot answered truthfully, "Sounds good to me."

Verbena had failed. Then, as these things sometimes happen, one Monday morning Tot woke up and looked out the window and watched Verbena out in the backyard hanging her laundry on the clothesline, when all of a sudden a bumblebee flew up her dress. Verbena immediately dropped her basket and whooped and high-stepped around the yard, holding her dress up in the air, all the time hollering, "Whooo! Whooo!"

After a moment, when the bee had finally found its way out of her skirt, Verbena regained her composure and looked around. Satisfied that nobody had seen her flying around her yard in broad daylight with her dress over her head, she went over and finished her task. But in the next house Tot was laughing so hard that tears ran down her cheeks, and she had to put a pillow over her face to keep Verbena from hearing her. She had never laughed so hard in all her life, and she couldn't stop. All alone in the bed, the minute she would start to quiet down, the vision of Verbena would reappear, and she would be screaming with another fit of laughter.

Later, she looked at herself in the bathroom mirror, and that started her laughing again. The next day she woke up feeling sore all over but very calm and rested, and for the first time in months she felt like she might get up for good.

A week later she went back to work with a new outlook on life. "Norma," she said, "I've been on the verge of a nervous breakdown all my life, and now that I've had it, I feel a whole lot better."

MACKY and Norma's daughter, Linda, had married, but she continued to work to help put her husband through law school, a fact that irritated Macky to no end. "If he can't support a wife on his salary, then he shouldn't have gotten married," Macky said.

Norma's hopes of becoming a grandmother had been dashed when Linda had a miscarriage in her third month. After the miscarriage Linda and her husband had begun having problems. Linda had wanted to try again, but he was against it until he finished school. Macky said it was because the husband was afraid he would lose his meal ticket, but as Norma pointed out, Macky had never liked him in the first place.

One afternoon a year later, when Macky walked in the door from work, Norma met him in the living room. "Linda called and said she is calling back at six because she wants to talk to both of us." They looked at each other wide eyed. "What do you think?"

Macky said, "I hope it's what we think."

"Do you think it could be?" Norma asked.

"I'm hoping it is."

"Do you want anything to eat now, or do you want to wait?"

Macky looked at his watch. "We only have forty-five minutes. Let's just wait."

"All right, but what are we going to do for forty-five minutes?"

"Should we call her?"

"No. She said she had a meeting and would call us when she finished."

"I hope it's what I think it is," Macky said.

"I know you do, but you never know, and if it is what we think, don't offer any advice. She knows how you feel. Especially about her husband. You certainly made that clear. Nobody can accuse you of being subtle." Norma shook her head. "Making a complete spectacle of yourself. I've never been so embarrassed in my entire life."

"All right, Norma," said Macky.

"You could have at least said something in private and not waited till her wedding day to pull a stunt like that."

Macky got up and went into the den, but Norma continued. "Imagine such a thing. It's part of the ceremony. Everyone knows when they say, 'Who gives this woman in marriage?' you are supposed to say, 'I do,' and step back." Norma got up and started rearranging the pillows on the sofa. "But no, you had to say right out loud, 'I'm not giving her—I'm just loaning her.' "

"Okay, Norma," he said from the den.

"And then to glare at the groom like that. No wonder they're having trouble. I could hardly face his parents. And then to have Aunt Elner laugh out loud like that—it's a wonder our daughter even speaks to us."

Macky came back in. "She knows what I meant. I was not going to stand up anyplace, church or not, and say I'm giving my daughter away like she was something we had sitting around the house. And no matter what you think, I still say it was a rash decision."

"She had dated him on and off for six years. How rash can that be? You knew she was going to get married sometime, and to sit there and carry on like that . . . Everyone heard you. I was the mother of the bride. I was the one who was supposed to cry, not you."

"Norma, why are you dredging up all this old stuff?"

"Oh, I don't know, just nervous I guess. Do you want some crackers or something? I have some pimento cheese."

"No. I'll just wait until after she calls."

They sat across from each other, waiting, and said nothing until the phone rang. Then he got on the extension in the den, and she picked up in the kitchen. After they hung up, Macky came strolling into the kitchen all smiles, but Norma was not smiling. "Well, I hope you're satisfied now," she said.

"I am," he said, looking in the refrigerator for the pimento cheese.

Norma opened the cabinet where she kept the crackers. "Honestly, I never saw a man so happy his daughter was getting a divorce in all my life."

AFTER MONROE'S FUNERAL, something happened to Bobby. Going home had made him remember not so much who he was, but all the things he had wanted to be. Yes, he had made good money, had enough in the bank, held good stocks—no complaints there. They had two homes, one in Cleveland, one in Florida. His children had gone to the best schools; he had worked hard, been a good provider. But now those old secret longings came creeping back. He found he hated to put on a tie and sit in stuffy corporate offices.

After three months of thinking about it, Bobby walked in the door one night and said, "Lois, what would you say if I told you I wanted to go back to school?"

Lois said, without a moment's hesitation, "I would say do it!"

And so Mr. Robert Smith took early retirement and went back to college and got his doctorate in history. His dissertation, *The American West: Dream and Reality,* was published, and Dr. Robert Smith and his wife went on a lecture tour, and as Lois told their children, "Your father is having the time of his life."

The Nineties

WHEN the body of the large, heavyset woman in the red wig was brought to the Cecil Figgs funeral parlor for embalming, they discovered that the lady on the table was no lady. The man in the bright green dress was none other than Mr. Cecil Figgs!

What a scandal. Thank heaven, Cecil's mother had not lived to see it. Jake Spurling immediately flew to New Orleans. But even he, with all his powers of deduction, could not figure out how Figgs had wound up living in New Orleans for the past twentysomething years as Miss Anita "Boom Boom" de Thomas. As hard as he tried, Jake could come up with nothing. The only human being who knew what had happened to Hamm and the rest of the men was now dead, and even he had not known it all. Jake might have solved

some of the mystery, but he had missed a very important clue years ago. A piece of wood had washed up with the word AYE written on it. The river rescue authorities checked their logs and found that a boat registered to a Mr. J. C. Patterson, named *Aye Aye, Skipper,* had been lost eighteen years ago. They assumed it was from the Patterson boat, but they were wrong. That piece of wood was the only thing left of *The Betty Raye*.

WHEN *The Betty Raye* had docked in New Orleans, Cecil called a contact in Louisiana who had promised to sell him formaldehyde at a cut rate. Cecil figured that as long as he was there, he would have the man load *The Betty Raye* with eighty gallons, and Cecil would bring it back to Missouri. While Hamm and the other men were off having their meeting and Cecil was in the French Quarter, the boat was loaded not only with the formaldehyde but also with fifty cases of tax-free bootleg rum from Cuba that Rodney Tillman had arranged to take back to Missouri as well.

Later that night, after the meeting, *The Betty Raye,* loaded to the gills with cheap booze and cut-rate formaldehyde, headed back to the boathouse. The men were playing cards en route, and Seymour Gravel was chewing on his smelly cigar. "I'm out," he said. He threw his cards down, complaining about his bad hand, and began looking for a match. Hamm said to Seymour, "If you're gonna smoke that thing, go sit in the back."

Seymour waddled back and sat down on a box and continued to search his pockets for a match. "Hey, Wendell, throw me your lighter for a minute."

Wendell, preoccupied with trying to decide whether or not to raise Hamm, reached into his shirt pocket and tossed his heavy silver Zippo with the marine insignia on it back to him. Seymour reached out but missed, and the lighter sailed on past him. As it was turning over in midair, the top flew open, and when it hit the side of one of the boxes, it landed right smack on its small wheel. As people often say when such a freak thing happens, if you tried, you would not be able to do it again in a million years. The spark from

the lighter ignited the dry straw the liquor was packed in and started to spread like wildfire.

What none of the men knew was that a few months earlier the real owner of the boat, Mr. Anthony Leo, had acquired some stolen dynamite he was planning to use to settle a business dispute. And he had it stashed in a secret compartment in the bottom of *The Betty Raye* for safekeeping. The gallons of flammable formaldehyde, the boxes of ninety-proof alcohol, and the dynamite below proved to be not only illegal but also a lethal combination. Two men out on the river in a rowboat, fishing that night, came in and said they had just seen a huge comet come hurtling down from the sky. They were wrong. What they had seen was not a comet coming down. It was Hamm Sparks, boat, and cronies going up! Hamm Sparks had always wanted to go as high in the world as he could—and he had. As usual, the rest of the men had just been along for the ride.

But one man had not been along that night. Cecil Figgs had failed to show up at the time they were scheduled to leave, and they had left without him, which was fine with him. He was having too much fun. He woke up in New Orleans two days later in a seedy hotel in the French Quarter with a bad hangover. His young companion was gone but had left a note:

> Dear Ramón,
>
> Thanks for the good time. Call me the next time you are in town.
>
> Love,
>
> Todd

Cecil always used the name Ramón Navarro when he was out of town. When he realized that it was Tuesday and he had missed taking his mother to the eye doctor the day before, he felt sick with guilt. He dressed and walked next door to eat breakfast and figure out what he would say to his mother. He picked up the *Times-Picayune* newspaper someone had left on the counter. When he saw the front page, he almost fainted: HAMM SPARKS, FOUR COMPANIONS PRESUMED DEAD.

The article underneath the pictures of all five men, including him, said the police believed the missing men had been murdered, and it looked like the work of professionals. At the moment they were questioning several men with Mob connections.

What little hair Cecil had stood up on the back of his head. His first instinct was to call his mother. But he realized that if someone had been out to kill them and found out he was still alive, they might try again. Desperately he tried to figure out what to do, and it struck him. Wait a minute, he thought. He was, for all intents and purposes, dead. For the first time in his life he was free to be who he really was. He would no longer have to lead a double life, always terrified he might upset his mother or disgrace the family.

In the end, the man Hamm and the boys had taken the meeting with in New Orleans said nothing. He could not afford to have his name involved in any scandal. Mr. Anthony Leo of St. Louis did wonder what had happened to the boat and his missing dynamite, but he was certainly in no position to say anything, and for years he continued to wonder but kept his mouth shut. The man who'd sold Rodney the illegal rum said nothing, and the man who'd sold Cecil the cut-rate formaldehyde said nothing. And Cecil said nothing.

In fact, there was no Cecil. From that day forward, nobody but he knew that Miss Anita "Boom Boom" de Thomas, gorgeous headliner at the famous My Oh My Club in New Orleans, was Mr. Cecil Figgs of Missouri. Cecil had been given an opportunity that few people in this world ever get. He had been shown an open door that led to a new life, and he had walked through it to the other side. Mother Figgs and the entire Figgs clan were left a small fortune and the warm memory of a good son. And he was going to have a good time the rest of his life. He had only one regret in leaving Cecil behind. It just about killed him not to be able to plan the governor's funeral. It would have been the triumph of his career. Oh, well.

MACKY could read the handwriting on the wall. Three different malls had sprung up, and now with the brand-new Home Improve-

ment Center in one and Wal-Mart and Ace Hardware in the other, his small hardware store had lost business. Pretty soon he and Norma started sending off for brochures of retirement communities. As it turned out, the decision was made in less than forty-eight hours, and it had nothing to do with anything that was planned. Verbena and Merle called. They had moved to Florida, and they said they had a nephew who lived in a gated community in Vero Beach, and he had just found out that a house was coming on the market. The nephew had called to see if they were interested. He said that it was one of the best retirement complexes down there, and if somebody moved fast, they could buy it from the owner, a friend of his, and not have to pay the commission.

After Macky got off the phone, he told Norma about it. "But the bad news is," he said, "we have to make up our minds right away. Merle said there are people waiting in line to buy it if we don't."

Norma panicked. "Oh my God. Do we have time to call Linda?"

"Yes, honey, go on."

After ten minutes Norma handed the phone to Macky.

"Daddy, what do you think?"

"It's up to your mother, whatever she thinks."

Norma threw up her hands. "You always do this."

"Well, Daddy, it sounds like a good deal to me. If you get there and don't like it, you can always turn around and sell it. Do you know anybody other than Verbena's nephew who lives in Vero Beach? Anybody you could ask?"

"No."

"Let me call around." Twenty minutes later she called back. "Daddy, listen to this: 'Vero Beach, Florida, home of the famous Dodgertown.' "

"What's that?"

"Daddy, it's where the L.A. Dodgers have their spring training. You and Mother can go and watch the Dodgers play."

The next afternoon, Norma called Linda. "Well, honey, we did it. Daddy told the man yes. I just hope to God we don't get down there and find out we're in the middle of a swamp."

IT WASN'T IN A SWAMP, BUT when they walked into their new home, Norma was silent. The cottage-cheese ceilings were lower than expected, and there were stains all over the mustard-gold shag rug, which did nothing to enhance the olive-green stove and refrigerator. The fact that the house had been closed up for three months and smelled like mildew did not help ease the initial shock. Macky was already wondering how hard it would be to sell it, when Norma surprised him, as she still could, by saying, "Oh, Macky, it's not so bad. I can whip this place into shape in no time." They stayed in a motel until Macky could get the rug pulled up and have the walls repainted. Norma went to Sears and bought a new white refrigerator and stove and had Goodwill come and pick up the old green ones. Macky laid a new sheet of white linoleum on the kitchen floor. A week later, when the van carrying their furniture arrived from Missouri and everything was put in its place and the stucco house looked at least a little familiar, Macky sat down on his old chair from home and flipped up the leg rest and thought, Now what?

After a few months Norma had made a lot of new friends, and Aunt Elner, who was a widow now and had joined them in retirement, was as happy as a lark with all the Bingo games they had down there. But Norma was worried about Macky. As she had said to Linda on the phone that morning, "Your daddy is not adjusting to retirement."

Norma had been reading the volunteer-positions-for-seniors column to Macky, as she did every other day, and as usual, he'd resisted her suggestions.

"Norma, I've told you, I am not going to stand around like some old senile fart and welcome people to Wal-Mart, for God's sake."

"I didn't say Wal-Mart. Look, it says here you can volunteer at the high school cafeteria or the library. They want seniors to set a good example to the young people. What's wrong with that? At home you used to do all kinds of things for the community."

"That was different."

"How can it be different?"

"It was my community. This isn't my community."

"It is now. Young people are just the same everywhere. Don't you want to be a role model, a good influence?"

He left the house and took a walk around the complex. It was only the end of November, but some people had already put up Christmas decorations. In the glaring Florida sun it looked like the entire community had gone mad and decorated for Christmas in the middle of summer. Macky knew by the calendar that it was about to be Christmas, but other than that, one day was no different from the next. All the earmarks of the season that he had gone by for the last sixty-two years were gone. He had read that a person's ability to adjust was a sign of intelligence. So far he was failing the test.

He wandered over to Ocean Park, sat on a concrete bench, and stared out at the blue water. The world he had known was gone. Not only was he living in an alien place, but while he had been busy all these years making a living, someone had changed the rules.

When he'd grown up, everybody had more or less agreed to a certain way of living. You didn't lie; you didn't cheat or steal; you honored your parents; your word was your bond. In this new world, all he heard was people saying how bad we were, how corrupt we had been, and how terrible white men were. He had not felt like a bad person, but now he was the oppressor, responsible for every bad thing that had ever happened in the history of the world, and all he had tried to do was live a good and decent life. The world had flipped over like a giant pancake, and everything was backward. People were sticking rings in their noses. Even pretty little girls were running around with green hair, their bodies pierced everywhere. Things people used to be ashamed to talk about now sold books and got them on TV. And never in a million years would he have dreamed that baseball players would be wearing earrings.

He leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees and stared down at the sandy ground. After a few minutes he noticed a tiny ant struggling to carry what looked like a large piece of potato chip. He watched the ant as it crawled over rocks and other obstacles, determined to get back home with his treasure. Macky watched the ant until it was out of sight, and he smiled for the first time in weeks.

Who knows? he thought. If he keeps on going, the little son of a bitch might just make it.

The next day Norma marched in the door and said, "I have taken the bull by the horns. Come out to the car and help me bring it in." When they got to the car, there it was, in a box that looked like the hide of a black-and-white cow. Norma had bought him a computer.

"Norma, I don't know how to use that thing."

"Neither do I, but we are going to learn. I've signed us up for lessons at Comp World. It can't be hard; they say even first graders can do it. Besides, Linda said if we got one, we could e-mail each other."

"Norma, I'll help you set it up, but I'm not going to any classes over at Comp World. You go if you like."

Five months later, after much cussing, he let Norma show him how to get on the Internet, and he was pleasantly surprised when after a few tries he got into a chat room. "Hey, any old guys out there remember the Hardy Boys?" Within two minutes Marvin from Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania, answered.

"Hey, good buddy. Affirmative. Have two copies of *Missing Chums*; would be happy to send one."

The next thing Norma knew, she could not get him off the Internet. He was all over the map. He was even able to locate fly-fishing experts. "This is just like ham radio, only better," he said.

Norma said, as usual, "See? I told you."

Life started to perk up for Macky. His little granddaughter, Apple, Linda's adopted daughter from China, started coming down for visits, and he was able to teach her all the fine points of baseball. One beautiful Sunday the two of them went to the Dodger game over at Dodgertown and had a wonderful time. The little girl did not know it, but one day years from now she would look back on that day and remember how the sun felt and the smell of the grass, the hot dogs and peanuts her granddaddy bought her, the feel of his hand holding hers as they walked home, and she would smile.

ALL'S well that ends well. Take what happened to Betty Raye, for instance. Although she had started out poor in life and had been

deprived of her rightful place in the world, the universe sometimes has a way of righting things. Her two boys were lucky in business and made a killing in real estate. Her uncle Le Roy Oatman's guilt over leaving the gospel group and joining a hillbilly band finally paid off in a big way. In 1989, while on a three-day bender in Del Rio, Texas, he wrote a song about how fortune and fame don't mean a thing, because, as the title says, "I Never Said Good-bye to Momma." Country-and-western star Clint Black recorded it, and it became an overnight hit. When Le Roy passed on, he left Betty Raye, the only one in the family who had been nice to him, millions of dollars in royalties that just kept on rolling in. But rich as she was, Betty Raye still lived happily in her red brick house.

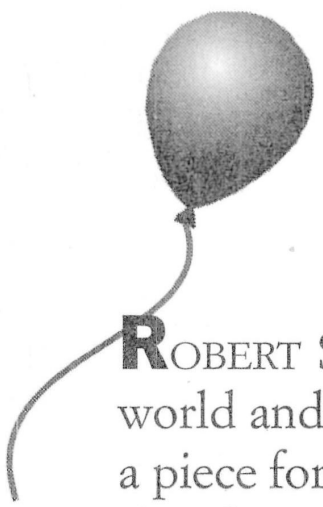
To the Public at Large

It's Tot again, with a late update. Believe it or not, I have married again. I know it is a surprise; it was a surprise to me. He is a retiree from the poultry business, with good benefits, a widower—i.e., no living wife or ex-wives, children, dog, or cat. Hoorah! He owns (totally paid for) a tan-and-brown Winnebago, and he doesn't drink. He drove through here and stopped at the Elmwood Springs cemetery to see the graves of his friends, Doc and Dorothy Smith. I was out there pulling weeds off of Momma's grave, and I said, "Who are you looking for?" And the rest is history. As I write this, Charlie and I are just outside Nashville, headed on up to Minnesota to the Mall of America—where I plan to shop till I drop—then on down to Florida to Vero Beach, to visit Macky and Norma and Aunt Elner, where we may stay for good. The Goodnight sisters and Verbena and Merle have moved there, and they say Bobby Smith and his wife, Lois, and Anna Lee and her husband come down and visit all the time, so it will be just like home—only better. No Whootens. My health is still pretty good, considering what all I've

had to put up with, and they say with all the advances in modern medicine that age sixty is now the new forty, so that makes me around fifty-one again!

Best wishes,
Mrs. Tot Whooten Fowler

P.S. I am happy for the first time in my life.



Epilogue

ROBERT Smith, given the fact that he had traveled all around the world and back lecturing on the Old West, had been asked to write a piece for Aunt Elner's favorite magazine, *Reader's Digest*. He wandered around the house for days thinking about the kings and queens, African chieftains, Prime Ministers and Presidents of countries he had met. It was amazing how many people were still fascinated by cowboys and Indians. He had met so many interesting people that it was hard to pick just one. Then one day he chose his subject. He sat down and started on:

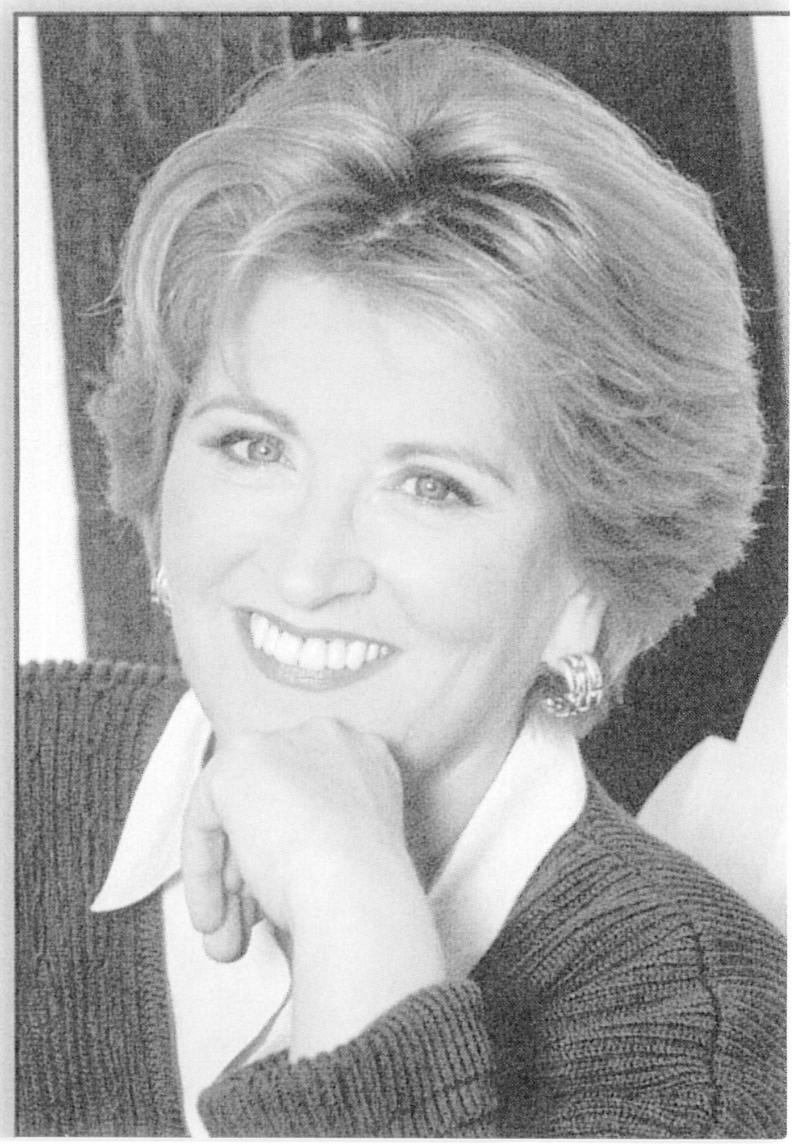
The Most Unforgettable Character I Ever Met
by Dr. Robert Smith

Her name was Dorothy, and she happened to be my mother. I guess a good place to start would be in 1946 in my hometown of Elmwood Springs, Missouri, a little place you have probably never heard of. . . .

Is that her real name? Well, it's not the name she was born with. Fannie Flagg, best-selling novelist, award-winning screenwriter, and popular comedienne, was stagestruck at an early age. (She wrote and acted in her first play, titled *The Whoopee Girl,* in the fifth grade.) So, naturally, when she turned eighteen, the Birmingham, Alabama, native wanted to go professional and join Actors' Equity. But there was a slight problem. The name on her birth certificate—Patricia Neal—was already taken by a famous movie star.

"You want a name people won't forget," her father, a motion-picture projectionist, advised when she was forced to establish a new identity. Recalls Flagg, "I was doing comedy at the time, so my father suggested that if I had a silly name, it would set the mood for doing comedy, and of course, he was right."

After studying drama at the Pittsburgh Playhouse, where she was told to "forget about acting" because of her thick southern accent, she defied the odds, went to New York, and launched a successful television (*Candid Camera,* etc.), Broadway, and Hollywood acting career. A severe dyslexic, Flagg is, however, proudest of defying the odds in her second career as a famous author.



"You want a name people won't forget."

In the bleak midwinter

mysteries are born.

And sometimes they end up

on a church doorstep.

WINNER OF THE 2001 ST. MARTIN'S PRESS / MALICE DOMESTIC AWARD

JULIA SPENCER-FLEMING

IN THE BLEAK MIDWINTER

CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS one hell of a night to throw away a baby. The cold pinched at Russ Van Alstyne's nose and made him jam his hands deep into his coat pockets, grateful that the Washington County Hospital had a police parking spot just a few yards from the ER doors. A flare of red startled him, and he watched as an ambulance backed out of its bay silently, lights flashing. The driver leaned out his window, craning to see his way between cement rails.

"Kurt! Hey! Anything for me?"

The driver waved at Russ. "Hey, Chief. Nope. You heard about the baby?"

"That's why I'm here."

Kurt continued to back out. "Hard to imagine sumpin' like that here in Millers Kill. . . ." The rest of his commentary was lost as he heeled the ambulance into the road. Russ waved, then pushed open the antiquated double door to the emergency department.

His glasses fogged up within seconds in the moist heat of the foyer. He pulled off the wire frames and rubbed them with the end of his scarf, mentally cursing the myopia that had finally led him, at forty-eight, to cave in and wear the things full-time.

"Hey, Chief!" As Russ tucked his glasses over his ears, Mark Durkee, one of his night-shift officers, snapped into focus.

"Hey, Mark," Russ said. "Talk to me."

The officer waved his chief down the drab hallway toward the emergency room. "Man, it's like something out of a Bing Crosby movie. The priest at St. Alban's found the little guy bundled up at the door of the church. The doctor's checking him out now."

"How's the baby look?"

"Fine, as far as they can tell. He was wrapped up real well, and the doc says he wasn't out in the cold more'n a half hour." Nothing shook Russ as much as an abused child.

Mark and Russ nodded to the admissions nurse in the ER waiting room. "Evening, Alta," Russ said. "How's business?" The waiting room, decorated with swags of tired tinsel and a silver tree, was empty except for a teenager sprawled over one of the sofas.

"Slow," the nurse said, buzzing them into the emergency treatment area. "Typical Monday night."

"Look over there," Mark said, pointing. Framed by limp white curtains dangling from ceiling tracks, an athletic-looking woman in gray sweats was leaning on a plastic incubator, writing in a pocket-size notebook.

"Who the hell's that?" Russ asked. "I swear, if they let a reporter in here before we've cleared the facts, I'll—" He strode toward the incubator. "Hey, you," he said.

His challenge brought the woman's chin up, and she snapped her head around. She was plain, no makeup, nondescript dark blond hair scraped back in a ponytail. She had that overbred look he associated with rich women from the north side of town: high cheekbones and a long, thin nose that was perfect for looking down at folks. Mark grabbed his arm, grinning. "No, no. That's the priest, Chief." He laughed out loud at the expression on Russ's face. The priest? She gave Russ a look that said, "Wanna make something of it?" He felt himself coloring. Her eyes were exceptional: true hazel, like granite seen under green water.

Russ decided the best defense was a good offense. "I'm Russell Van Alstyne, Millers Kill chief of police." He held out his hand. She shook firm, like a guy.

"Clare Fergusson," she said. "I'm the new priest at St. Alban's—the Episcopal church." There was a faint testiness in her voice. Russ relaxed a fraction. A woman priest. If that didn't beat all.

"I know which it is. Can you tell me what happened, um"—what was he supposed to call her?—"Mother?"

"I go by Reverend, Chief. Ms. is fine, too."

"Oh, sorry. I never met a woman priest before."

"We're just like the men priests, except we're willing to pull over and ask directions."

A laugh escaped him. Okay. He wasn't going to feel like an unwashed heathen around her.

"I was leaving the church through the kitchen door in the back. I was going for a run." She looked down and waggled one sneaker-shod foot. Her sweatshirt read ARMY. "The box was on the steps. I thought maybe someone had left off a donation at first, because all I could see were the blankets. When I picked it up, though, I could feel something shifting inside." She looked up at Russ. "Imagine how troubled and desperate someone would have to be to leave a baby out in the cold like that."

Russ grunted. "Anything that might tell us who left him?"

"No. Just the baby, and the blankets, and the note inside."

Russ frowned at Mark. "You didn't tell me about any note."

"Reverend Fergusson didn't mention it until after I had called you," the officer explained. He handed Russ a plastic-encased paper.

"That's my fault, yeah," said the priest, not sounding at all apologetic. "I didn't call the Department of Human Services until I was over here, and I wanted to make sure they knew what the baby's parents intended."

It was an eight-and-a-half-by-eleven sheet of paper ripped from a spiral-bound notebook. The handwriting was blocky, childlike. "This is our baby, Cody," it read. "Please give him to Mr. and Mrs. Burns here at St. Alban's. We both agree they should have him, so there won't be trouble with the adoption. Tell our baby we love him."

Russ met the priest's green-brown eyes. "Kids," he said.

"That would be my guess," she said.

"Who are the Burnses?"

"Geoffrey and Karen Burns."

"The lawyers," Russ said, surprised.

"They're parishioners of St. Alban's. I understand they've been seeking adoption for over two years now. They've been on the Prayers of the People list for the past two weeks."

"This is something published? Or what?"

"Prayed out loud every Sunday during the service."

He looked closely at her. "Sounds like at least one of the baby's parents might go to your church."

She looked uncomfortable. "Yeah. Although everyone who knows the Burnses also knows they're looking for a baby."

"Why leave it at St. Alban's? Why not on the Burnses' doorstep?"

Reverend Fergusson swept her hands open wide.

Russ handed the note back to Mark. "What time did you find the baby?" he asked the priest.

"About nine thirty," she said. "There was a welcoming reception from the vestry tonight that finished up around nine. I changed in my office and then headed out."

Russ squinted, trying for a mental picture of the area around St. Alban's. "What's behind the church?"

"A parking lot, then the rectory, where I live. My driveway is on the other side of the house."

Russ sighed. "The parents could have parked anywhere and snuck over to the stairs with the baby. I somehow doubt we're gonna get an eyewitness."

The priest tapped the note. "Chief Van Alstyne, exactly how hard do you have to look for the parents of this baby?" She was leaning toward him slightly, focusing on him as if he were the only person in the whole hospital.

Russ looked at her. "Well, I don't need to tell you that leaving a baby like that is called endangering a child," he said. She nodded. "And of course, if we can't find the parents, it's going to take longer for DHS to actually get the baby out of foster care and into an adoptive home. But the thing is to find out how voluntary this really

was, giving up the baby. When a woman really wants to give up her kid for adoption, she usually gets in touch with an agency or a lawyer. These throwaway situations—"

"She didn't throw Cody away. Whoever she is."

"No, she didn't. Which makes me think it's not one of those times when the mother is a druggie or a psycho. But it does make me wonder if her boyfriend or her father forced her into it."

"I never thought of that," Reverend Fergusson said, biting her lower lip. "Oh, dear. Maybe I shouldn't have—"

The emergency-room doors opened with a hydraulic pouf. Russ recognized the small, bearded man in the expensive topcoat and the striking brunette woman at his side, but he'd know who they were, just from the look on Reverend Fergusson's face, even if he had never seen them in the Washington County Courthouse before.

"We got here as soon as we could," Geoffrey Burns said. His glance flicked around the treatment area, lighting on the incubator. His wife saw it at the same time.

"Oh," she said. "Oh. Is that him?"

The priest nodded. She stepped aside, allowing the Burnses a clear view of the sleeping baby. "Oh, Geoff, just look at him."

Her husband stared at the baby for a long moment, then looked at Russ. "Chief Van Alstyne. I take it the Department of Human Services hasn't seen fit to send anyone over yet."

"Mr. Burns." Russ nodded. "I expect we'll see somebody soon. They're a little overwhelmed over there, you know."

"Oh, don't I just," Geoff Burns said.

"I take it Reverend Fergusson called you about the note that was found with the baby?" Russ glanced pointedly toward the priest. "You folks know that it's way too early to start thinking of this boy as your own, no matter what the parents wrote."

Karen Burns turned toward him. "Of course, Chief. But we are licensed foster parents without any children in our home right now, and we intend to press DHS to place Cody with us."

"Under the standard of the best interests of the child, it's preferable that a preadoptive child be fostered with the would-be adop-

tive parents if there are no natural relatives able to care for the child. *Young* versus *The Department of Social Services.*"

Russ blinked at Geoff Burns's aggressively set brows. "But we don't know that there aren't any natural relatives, Mr. Burns. We don't know if the mother gave him up of her own free will or not." He shifted his weight forward, deliberately using his six feet three inches as a visual reminder of his authority here.

The pediatric resident entered the treatment area. "Oh, hey!" he said. "You must be the Burnses. Your priest here told me about you. You wanna hold Cody?" He unlatched the top of the incubator and scooped up the baby, placing him in Karen Burns's arms before she had a chance to respond.

"Oh," she said. "Oh." Her husband put his arm around her, turning her away from the others. Russ, rubbing away at the headache building behind his eyebrows, glanced down at Reverend Fergusson. It took him a moment to identify the expression on her face, it had been so long since he'd seen it directed at him. Sympathy.

"The baby's in real good shape," the doctor said, pulling out several sheets of paper stapled together. "Here's a copy of his tests. I place the time of birth within the last two days. No drugs in his system, no signs of fetal alcohol syndrome or abuse. His cord was cut inexpertly, but somebody kept it nice and clean."

Russ scanned the report, noting the blood group—AB negative. "Okay," he said. "Mark, get me the box and the blankets. We'll see if we can get anything from those." Mark nodded and disappeared into the examination cubby. Russ folded the medical report and tucked it into his jacket pocket.

"Here you go, Chief," Mark said, returning with the box. It was sturdy, new-looking—and there were probably hundreds just like it tossed into the Grand Union storeroom. The blankets were a mix: an old, well-worn gold polyester thing, a heavy woolen horse blanket in plaid, and what looked like two brand-new flannel baby blankets.

Reverend Fergusson was talking softly to the Burnses. Karen Burns said something, and her husband nodded. All three of them bent their heads. Russ realized with a shock that they were praying.

Openly displayed religion made him uncomfortable, and it didn't help when the priest signed the cross over both of them and then laid her hands on the baby and blessed him. She really was a priest, a woman priest. Were Episcopalians like Catholics? He'd have to ask his mother; she'd know.

When Reverend Fergusson broke away and walked straight toward him, he thought for one guilty moment she must have read his mind and was coming over to give him what for.

"Chief Van Alstyne, will you be leaving soon?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said warily. Did she want to pray over him, too?

"Ah. Well, Karen and Geoff are going to stay here until after the caseworker arrives, and I, um"—she hesitated—"I called an ambulance, you see, 'cause I thought Cody ought to be seen as soon as possible, and I—I don't have . . ."

The light dawned. "Do you need a ride home, Reverend?"

"I don't want to impose."

"I'd be glad to give you a lift if you don't mind me stopping by the station to drop this off before we get to your house. I want to make sure our fingerprint guy has it first thing." He hefted the box.

"I'm not in any hurry," she said.

Russ waved good-bye to Mark and gestured for the priest to precede him through the emergency-department doors.

The dry, cold air outside the overheated hospital was like a good stiff drink after a hard day. Russ breathed deeply. He noticed the priest wasn't carrying a coat. "Hey, Reverend. You can't go outside in just sweats this time of year. Where are you from, anyway?"

She looked down at her outfit. "Southern Virginia. And when I was in the army, I managed to never get myself stationed anyplace where the temperature dipped to below freezing."

"Neat trick," he said. In the army? A woman priest in the army. What next? She parachute out of planes dropping Bibles?

"I was a helicopter pilot," she said. "You'd be surprised how often we needed to drop men and gear into overheated climates."

"No, I wouldn't," he said. "I was career army. First in the infantry, then an MP. I retired about four years ago."

"Really?" She looked up at him curiously. "I assumed you'd lived in Millers Kill all your life."

Russ pulled open the passenger-side door of his cruiser. She slid into the seat. He crossed to the other side, dropped the box into the back seat, and got behind the wheel. "I was born here, lived here my first eighteen years." He started up the car, turned on the radio, and grabbed the mike. "Ten fifty, this is Ten fifty-seven en route from the hospital to the station." The radio crackled, and Harlene's voice came on the line. "Ten fifty-seven, this is Ten fifty. See you soon."

Russ shifted into gear and eased out of the hospital parking lot onto Burgoyne Avenue. Nearing midnight on a Monday, there was hardly any traffic on the normally busy road.

Reverend Fergusson shifted in her seat. "You were telling me you were born and raised right here."

"Oh, yeah," he sighed. "Probably would have gotten a job at the mill and never left town. But I got out of high school in '69, and my number came up in the Instant Loser Lottery. Next thing I knew, it was good-bye New York State, hello Southeast Asia."

He checked the gauge on the heater. "Turned out the army and I made a pretty good match. We went from Vietnam to the Gulf together." He switched the blower to high, and the interior began to warm up. "After I retired, I decided the time was right to finally come home. The old chief was retiring, and they needed someone with experience who wanted to live the quiet life up here in Washington County. My wife, Linda, loved the idea of us finally settling down somewhere other than a big city or busy post"—well, that was half true, she *had* wanted him to settle down—"and she likes being so close to my mother and my sister." Now that was a whopper. But it was the party line, and he stuck to it. "So that's how I wound up back in my old hometown a quarter century after I left."

"Does your wife work?"

"Oh, yeah. She has her own business, making custom curtains. It's been more successful than either of us imagined. She's getting into mail orders now, says she wants to make up a catalogue."

"You two have any kids?"

"No," he said. "What's your story? You from Virginia?"

"Born and bred in a small town outside of Norfolk," she said. "My family owns a charter and commercial air business. I had always thought I wanted to be part of it, so after college I joined the army as a helo jock. But as it turned out, I had to put my piloting plans aside when I was called to the priesthood. I went back to Virginia to go to seminary."

Russ didn't want to get into the mystical depths of how someone was called to the priesthood. "How'd you wind up here?" he asked.

"I spent a summer as an assistant curate in the Berkshires, and I just fell in love with it. I started looking for a position somewhere in New England, and when St. Alban's came open, I thought, Well, it's only a half-hour drive from Vermont."

"So you haven't experienced a North Country winter yet."

"Therein lies the rub, as they say. I've only been here for three weeks, so I'm not exactly acclimated yet. I do have a coat, though. When I stumbled over the baby, I was on my way out for a run."

He looked at her. "Just because we look like Bedford Falls from *It's a Wonderful Life,* don't be fooled into thinking bad things can't happen here. Watch where you run at night alone."

She waved a hand, unconcerned. "I can take care of myself," she said. "The army made sure of that."

Russ turned onto Radcliff, then made a left turn onto Main. He pulled the cruiser up in front of the station. "I'll leave the car running for you," he said. "Be back in a minute." He grabbed the box and took off through the icy air, bounding up the stairs two at a time. In the dispatch room, Harlene was just pouring herself a cup of coffee. "Harlene, you good-lookin' woman!" he said. Harlene was some ten years his elder, a big, square woman with an uncannily organized mind and a photographic memory of every highway, lane, and dirt road in three counties.

"One of these days I'm going to slap you with a sexual harassment lawsuit," she said, hefting herself into her chair.

"And let Harold know how much fun you're having over here? No way." Her husband, Harold, had recently retired and was riding

Harlene pretty hard to quit work and stay at home with him. "I'm gonna lock this into evidence," Russ said, waggling the box. "Will you leave a note for Phil to get on it first thing in the morning?"

"Okay, Chief. You got it." She pointed to the coffeemaker. "Just brewed a fresh pot."

"Gotta haul it," Russ said. "I'm giving the priest who found the baby a ride back to St. Alban's rectory."

"You and a priest." Harlene snorted. "I'd give good money to hear how that conversation goes."

"Actually," Russ said, "she's very easy to talk to. Old army, too."

Harlene was surprised. "Ask her what she thinks of my sexual harassment suit," she said.

Russ bit back a laugh and unlocked the evidence cage, tagging the box and scribbling his entry information in the logbook. Within two minutes he was out the front door again.

When he got into the cruiser, Reverend Fergusson jerked her hand away from the radio. "Sorry," she said. "I wanted to see if it sounded like it does on all those television shows."

"And?" Russ said, backing the car out of his parking spot.

"And it sounds like the state police have wa-a-a-ay too much time on their hands," she said. "One guy was going on and on about some fishing tournament he'd gone to."

They both laughed. "Yeah, well . . ." Russ said. "Mondays are the quietest night of the week. You come cruising with me on Friday, then you'll really hear something."

She pinned him with those clear hazel eyes. "Could I?"

Startled, he looked at her. "Reverend, why on earth would you want to do something like that?" he said.

"Because I want to get a feel for the problems of Millers Kill that I won't get in a vestry reception," she said. "Because I need to figure out what kind of outreach ministry my church ought to be doing. And because"—she grinned—"I'm a recovering adrenaline addict. Who hasn't had a fix in a while."

"Huh. I'm out pretty late. Don't you, I dunno, get up early to pray or something?"

She made an amused sound in the back of her throat. "Saturday's a day off for me. At least, it's supposed to be. So can I come?"

How do I get myself into these situations? he thought. "Okay, yeah," he said finally. "But you do what I say, and if I decide it's not safe, you get left behind. No arguments."

"Do I strike you as the argumentative type?" she asked.

He snorted. Along Church Street the Christmas decorations had been hung on the lampposts: same plastic candy canes and reindeer that had been there when he was a kid. He turned onto Elm. The rectory was a pretty Dutch Colonial from the turn of the century.

"Here it is, on the left."

"Nice," Russ said, parking in the drive. He turned toward her. "Good night, Reverend Fergusson."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, call me Clare." She opened her door and slid out, leaning down to keep him in view.

"Clare," he said. "And you can call me Russ. After all, if we're going to be partners next Friday . . ."

She nodded. "I'll be there, Russ. Good night, now." She slammed the door.

He waited until she had reached her front door and let herself in—without keys. He made a mental note to get on her about that come Friday. He backed out of her drive, smiling as he drove away.

THE girl unlocked the dead bolt and turned the latch. It was cold in the kitchen, but then again, she had been desperately cold all night long. She walked to the stairs and hefted her overnight bag, gasping as a cramping pain shot through her abdomen. She stopped, pressed her fist against her belly. Nothing to worry about. The book had said it was normal to have cramps for several days afterward.

She picked up her bag again and trudged up the wooden stairway to her bedroom. Inside, she dropped her luggage and sagged onto the bed. The springs creaked loudly.

"Mmmm," came a voice from the other side of the room. "Katie, is that you? Jeez, it's late."

"Yeah, Emily," she whispered, "it's me." She began to cry.

"Katie, what's wrong?" Emily snapped on a bedside lamp.

Katie shook her head, crying harder. Emily crossed to her bed and sat beside her, hugging her tight. Katie leaned on her shoulder, sobbing, while outside a dog barked into the freezing air.

CHAPTER TWO

THE clock in St. Alban's meeting room rang twelve slow, ceremonious hours. The donation of a grateful parishioner, it had a place of honor between two enormous diamond-paned windows. Where, Clare reflected, it had undoubtedly sat since its arrival in 1882. She was beginning to suspect the congregation of St. Alban's didn't exactly embrace innovation. Hiring the first female head of a parish in this area may have exhausted their reserves for the next ten years.

Norm Madsen tapped the sheet of paper before him reproachfully. "This isn't an agenda, Reverend Fergusson. We always have an agenda for the vestry meetings."

"And the Wednesday lunch meeting is always financials." Terence McKellan, the head of commercial loans at AllBanc, laced his hands across his commodious middle. "No offense, but articles about unwed mothers ought to go before the activities committee."

Clare breathed deeply, resting her arms on the massive black oak table that dominated the room. "I'm sorry I didn't compile an agenda. I'll be sure to do that next meeting. As for the newspaper article and the figures sheet in front of you, the baby found abandoned here Monday night inspired me to do some research into what facilities are available to help single teen mothers."

"There's plenty of aid in Millers Kill," Vaughn Fowler said. "Welfare and low-income housing, a soup kitchen." The retired colonel rapped the table with his chunky West Point ring as he enumerated each item.

"That's true, Mr. Fowler. No teenager with a baby is going to starve here. But look at this article from the Washington *Post* about a Junior League program I helped with when I was a seminarian. In their area the league had found that one of two things tended to happen when a girl had a baby: Either she dropped out of high school to care for the child or her mother stopped working to care for the child. Girls whose mothers gave up work to stay at home with the baby finished high school in higher numbers, but few of them found work afterward."

Fowler frowned. "Couldn't find work? Or didn't look for it?"

"Most of these girls had no experience with or example of combining motherhood and work. The Junior League program partnered girls with mentors, who tutored them in everything from parenting skills to how to interview for a job, and it provided free day care during the school day."

Fowler rapped the table with his ring. "Funding?"

Clare quelled the urge to respond, "Yes, sir." Colonel Fowler was the double of several commanding officers she had served under, complete with graying brush cut and age-defying figure. She flipped open to the last page. "Initial funding came from the league. Area churches donated the space." She looked around the table. "I propose St. Alban's start a similar project here. To be funded out of the general funds, using the nursery room for the day care. We could have a powerful effect on the lives of young women and children who otherwise don't have much of a future."

The room was silent for a moment. Vaughn Fowler's bright blue eyes seemed to be assessing her. "One of the goals we set for you was to grow St. Alban's. Bring in new families. This unwed-mother outreach, will it attract more of the members we want? Or will it scare some families away?"

Clare went blank. "What?"

"Reverend Clare, St. Alban's was one of the first Episcopal churches in this area. We've been able to draw members from even beyond the Millers Kill–Cossayaharie–Fort Henry townships because we have traditional worship in a beautiful setting. Before you

plunge ahead with your teen-mother project, I'd like to see you do something to draw favorable attention to St. Alban's."

Around the table the other vestry members were nodding.

Fowler's mouth tilted in the suggestion of a smile. "You were inspired, you said, by the baby abandoned at our back door. I suggest you help the Burnses to foster him. That's the kind of publicity that says we're a family-friendly place."

Clare looked out a leaded-glass window to where snow flurries were spinning through the air. "We could start by enlisting parish support," she said. She returned her attention to the table. "A letter-writing campaign to the DHS and the governor's office. Hold a Blessing of Adoption and invite the local press."

"Good! Excellent!" Fowler said.

"What about my mother-baby project?"

"You show us you can get results on the Burnses' adoption, and we'll back you on day care for unwed teens." Fowler glanced around the table, registering assent from the rest of the vestry. "Agreed? Then let's adjourn." Everyone stood, stacking papers and collecting coats.

"I've gotta make it to Fort Henry by one thirty," Terry McKellan said. "My daughter's getting a Mazda. Can you imagine what our insurance is gonna be with her driving in Boston?" He looked at Fowler. "What did you get Wes?"

"A Jeep Wrangler. Good in the snow. Unfortunately, it couldn't carry all his stuff down. I'm off to West Point tomorrow with another load." Clare attempted to edge past the men as they drifted toward the hallway. "And speaking of vehicles, Reverend Clare, that car of yours is totally impractical."

Clare had already heard several people's opinion of her cherry-red '92 MG. She smiled brightly. "Your son goes to West Point? And you're a graduate, too. You must be very proud."

Vaughn Fowler nodded. "He's the fifth generation of Fowlers to be an Academy man. Edie and I are very proud, yes."

Clare glanced at her watch. "Oh, look at the time. Gentlemen, I've got to run." She quick-stepped down the hall before the subject of her car could come up again.

She ducked into the parish office and caught her secretary, Lois, with a mouthful of yogurt. "I'm escaping comments about my car," Clare explained.

"Mmmm," Lois said, swallowing. "It's too tiny."

Clare poked at the Rolodex next to Lois's book of message slips. "The vestry says they'll support my young mother's outreach project if I can help the Burnses successfully adopt Cody. Now I just have to figure out how to influence New York State's Department of Human Services."

Lois's eyebrows arched.

"I think I'm going to need some help on this one."

"I think you might," Lois agreed.

RUSS was having one of those days that, if it were on video, you'd fast-forward through until you got to a good part. He had a mountain of paperwork covering his desk, stuff he'd been putting off until it had become a full day's job.

And now this. He had been expecting the article in the *Post-Star* about the baby. He'd given the reporter an interview, explaining what the police were doing to find the mother, saying the boy had been found "outside an area church," and omitting all mention of the note tucked in the box with the baby. What was making him grip his coffee mug was the paragraph devoted to the Burnses. How the reporter had found out about them he didn't know, but there it was: St. Alban's, the note, a plea to the mother to contact the couple directly. "We only want to help," Karen Burns was quoted. "We believe what the mother did was courageous, not criminal."

The phone rang. Through the frosted-glass window in his door he could see Harlene's outline as she crossed the office to pick it up. A moment later his line buzzed. He lifted the receiver.

"Chief Van Alstyne? Clare Fergusson. I hope I'm not calling at a bad time."

"No, no," he said, "not at all. I'm just contemplating whether I can throw Geoff Burns in jail for interfering with an investigation."

"You're contemplating what?"

"I take it you haven't read today's paper. The article about the abandoned baby."

"No. It's here somewhere." There was a rustling and a thumping sound. "Got it. Where is it?"

"On page three. Take a look at where Geoff Burns offers protection and free legal services to the mother! He might as well say, 'Come to us, and we'll see the police never lay a hand on you.' "

There was silence on the other end of the line. "Holy crow," Clare said after a moment. "Do you really think that Karen and Geoff might make contact with the mother and not tell you?"

"Yes."

She sighed. "Me, too. Is there anything you can do now the information about where Cody was found is out in the open? You can't really mean to arrest the Burnses."

"I'd like to. But there's nothing illegal about giving your opinion on what the mother did or in offering free legal aid."

"What if you offered to help them get the baby? You can use your influence with the Department of Human Services to get the baby assigned to them. In exchange they promise to let you know if the mother contacts them."

"My influence with DHS, huh?"

"C'mon. You must know a few people. I'm under the gun here, too. My vestry wants St. Alban's to help the Burnses. I've decided to get a letter-writing campaign going among the parishioners."

"Well, I guess it's worth a try. When were you planning to enlist your letter-writing troops?"

"Putting it into my sermon this Sunday would be the simplest thing. I was going to preach on what I saw on patrol with you this Friday. But maybe I can work them both in. . . ." There was a pause. "You haven't changed your mind, have you? About taking me?"

Russ laughed. "No. You might get your parishioners to write to the aldermen and have me tossed out on my ear. What time can I pick you up?"

"Evening prayer's at five fifteen, so I'll be free by six."

"Six is good. Wear a coat this time and some heavy boots."

"I'll bring two pair of mittens and electric socks. I'm really looking forward to it, Chief. Thank you."

"It's Russ, remember? And don't thank me until it's over."

STANDING behind the patrol car's open door, Clare kicked her feet against the front tire, hoping to keep her circulation going.

"I didn't do nuthin'! Get your hands off me!" In front of a large video arcade Russ was toe to toe with an angry, drunken young man. The kid was several inches over six feet and beefy.

Teens were crowded along the sidewalk outside the arcade. Clare scanned the crowd, looking for anyone else willing to take on trouble. She shivered inside the roomy police parka that Russ had lent her. When she had stepped out of the church in her leather bomber jacket, he had laughed at it. Sure enough, within an hour she was begging for something warmer. At the station, where they dropped off a drunk driver, Harlene dug through the lockers and emerged with a regulation brown parka large enough to fit a moose.

Russ leaned back, said something, crossed his arms. The kid hung his head, and for the first time Clare could see an oversized boy instead of a threat.

Russ beckoned to two teens who had been hovering near him. Clare couldn't make out his words, but it looked as if he was putting the troublemaker in their care. Russ pinned the big kid with a glare, raising his voice so everyone could hear. "If I have to come here again tonight, I'm arresting anybody involved. Got it?" There was a shuffle-footed assent from the crowd.

Russ trudged through the slush at the curbside and tugged open his door. He looked wearily across the roof at Clare. "Idiot kids," he muttered, sliding behind the wheel. Clare joined him inside the car as he reached for the radio. "Ten fifty, this is Ten fifty-seven."

"Come in, Ten fifty-seven."

"Harlene, will you call the Stoners and tell them to pick up Ethan at Videotek? And tell 'em he missed a drunk and disorderly by the skin of his teeth."

"Will do, Chief."

"We're headed out to the kill. See if there are any other kids out tonight making fools of themselves. Ten fifty-seven out."

Clare buckled herself in. "What exactly is the kill?"

"Kill's the old Dutch name for a big creek. Lotta towns around upstate have 'kill' in their names—Fishes Kill, Eddys Kill . . ."

"A big creek? Millers Kill looks more like a full-fledged river."

"It was dredged out during the building of the canal system in the early 1800s. Between the river traffic and the mills, it made the town." He shifted and pulled into traffic. They headed west, cruising slowly down the strip, past bars, a liquor store, a tightly shuttered pawnshop.

"Why didn't you take the boy in?" she asked.

"I know the Stoners. Ethan's not a bad kid." Russ signaled, turned down a narrow street, and drove past two dark, boarded-up warehouses. "He's just like a hundred other kids in this area. They drink, they do drugs, they get into fights because they've got nothing to do with their lives. There's nothing around here for average kids with no money for college."

They drove past the last streetlight into the darkness. "This is Route 137. We call it the Cossayaharie Road," he said. The pines and alders crowded in along the road, and beyond the trees the Adirondack piedmont closed the horizon around them.

Clare stretched her legs as Russ turned into a narrow lane overhung with snowy branches. The road was noticeably bumpier. They came to a dead end in a clearing marked by a few tire tracks.

She stared into the snow and darkness. "Where are we?"

Russ opened the door. "This is the lot for Payson's Park," he said, reaching behind her seat for two long, heavy flashlights. "In the summer the town puts out picnic benches and grills. It's nice."

She accepted a flashlight and got out. "There aren't any cars here," she pointed out.

Russ walked toward the edge of the clearing. "There's a trail that runs along the river for several miles. When I was a kid, you went on foot or you didn't go at all, but nowadays everybody's got four-wheel drive. And here we are, tire tracks."

He aimed the light into the woods, and Clare could see where the trail ran past the open picnic area and over a rise. They tromped forward, following the tire tracks.

"Half a mile upstream there's an abandoned railroad bridge that crosses over the kill. That's another spot we like to keep an eye on, for drinking or doing drugs."

Clare slipped where the trail took a downward turn, and Russ caught her arm, steadying her.

"Watch it," he said, pointing his light to the left. The land sloped steeply down to the half-frozen edge of the river. "I remember last year, some idiot came out here to jack deer, fell in the kill instead, and nearly died from hypothermia."

"Jack deer?" She caught a flash of something gleaming near the water and aimed her flashlight toward the thicket.

"Poaching, at night. If you shine a light into a deer's eyes, you can freeze it long enough to shoot."

The gleam looked funny, familiar but out of place. She moved the beam of light to the right. And saw a hand, barely distinguishable from the snow it rested on.

"Russ," she said. She pointed, part of her amazed at how steadily she was holding the flashlight. "Down there."

"Oh, my God!" he said. He scrambled down the slope, falling and sliding and catching at trees. "Oh, God. Oh, no." He hunkered down for a moment. She could see him shaking his head over and over. Then he straightened, turned toward her. "It's a girl. She's dead."

Clare pressed her gloved fist against her mouth. Russ pointed his light up at her, making her blink. "Clare? Are you okay?"

She nodded. "What do you want me to do?"

"Can you make it back up the trail to the car and call for help? I'm going to have to secure the area."

"Turn on the radio and ask for Harlene?"

"Yeah. Tell her we've found a body off the trail, about a quarter mile upstream from Payson's Park. Can you do that?" She nodded again. "Good girl," he said.

Clare headed up the trail, jogging as quickly as she could in the

snow. The trees crowded in against the path. She slipped and slid, trying not to break her pace. When she made it to the cruiser, her knees were aching from several falls, and she was sweaty under her borrowed parka. She slid into the car and flicked on the radio, and when she heard the dispatcher's hail, she keyed the mike and said exactly what Russ had told her. Harlene put her on hold for what seemed like an eternity.

"Okay, Reverend. I've got an ambulance on the way, and Dr. Dvorak will be waiting at the morgue. Officer Flynn is headed out, and the state troopers are sending a technician along with a crime-scene van. Can you lead them to the chief when they get there?"

Clare keyed the mike again. "Yes, I'll be here."

"Good girl. Dispatch out."

Clare stripped off her gloves and blew on her fingers. She could remember the time when she would have torn into anyone who called her a girl. At thirty-five she was finally mellowing.

She leaned her cheek against the vinyl of the car seat. She shut her eyes tight, trying to put the sight of that white hand, that dark hair somewhere she could bear it. Merciful God. That was the start of the collect she would pray on Sunday. Merciful God, give us grace. . . .

She was exhausted and numb when the squad car and ambulance pulled into the lot. She waved to a uniformed man, who must have been Officer Flynn, levering himself from his car. Next to the car two paramedics in bulky snowsuits jumped from the ambulance.

"Ma'am," Officer Flynn greeted her, "I'm awful sorry you had to see something like this." She echoed the sentiment silently as she got out of the car.

"If you follow me, I can take you to the chief," she said. Flynn opened the trunk of his car and hefted a canvas bag over his shoulder. As they began their slippery processional, he fished into the bag and retrieved a self-starting flare. He yanked the tab, and the clearing lit up. He stuck the flare into the snow beside the trail.

The EMTs balanced a pallet between them, picking their way through snow. Every few yards Flynn lit another flare. Clare kept her eyes on the tire tracks as they walked.

"There," she said, pointing down the steep slope where a single flashlight beam appeared and disappeared through the pines.

"Chief?" yelled Officer Flynn.

"Yeah! I'll come up! Don't anybody climb down until we've gotten some photographs."

Flynn pulled the tab on another flare, revealing Russ as he clambered back up the trail. "What's it look like, Chief?"

Russ shone his flashlight a couple of yards up the trail. Clare could see where the tire tracks they had been following came to an end. "Somebody drove in to this point and then backed up again." He shifted the light to the edge of the trail closest to the water.

"What's that?" Clare asked. The snow was heavily churned.

"That is where the girl slid down the slope." Russ sounded worn down. "I followed the trail she left back up to the car tracks."

Flynn whistled, a high, excited sound. Russ glared at him. "Sorry, Chief. Just— I haven't done a homicide yet."

"Homicide?" Clare looked down toward the water. "Someone killed her?"

"Looks that way," Russ said.

"Any clear tracks from whoever drove the car away?" she said.

He shook his head. "Nope. Could be whoever it was threw her body down the hill, hoping she'd land in the kill and disappear for a while. Or it could be she and the driver got into a fight while they were standing here, he clips her, and she falls down the hill. He panics and drives away."

Clare shook her head. "Dear God." She shivered. "Imagine lying there hurt, and seeing the car lights disappearing—"

"Don't think about it," Russ broke in. "We won't know anything until the coroner's report." They both looked into the darkness at the creek's edge. "There's something else," Russ said.

"What?"

"I think this murder may be connected to the baby you found."

"What? Why on earth would you—"

"Because I have two unusual, unexplainable events happening back to back. A girl abandons a baby. Now a girl shows up dead.

This isn't New York City, where Jane Does turn up twice a week."

A hallo echoed farther up the trail. A state trooper heaved into view, lugging a chest. "Chief Van Alstyne?" he shouted.

"Yeah, here," Russ called. When the trooper reached the chief, he dropped the chest, stenciled PROPERTY NYSP CRIME-SCENE UNIT, and pulled off a glove to shake hands with Russ.

"Sergeant Hayes," he said. "How can I help you, Chief?"

"We need photos mostly, starting here, where the tire tracks terminate"—Russ led the technician toward the site of the disturbance, careful to put his feet into his old boot prints—"and here, where she fell." Hayes nodded.

They backtracked to the others. Hayes opened the crime-scene chest and began digging out camera parts. Russ pulled Clare to one side. "Why don't you go back to the car," he said.

Clare shook her head. "I'd rather stay. At least until you bring her up. I'll walk with her back to the ambulance."

"You don't have to do that."

"I know I don't have to. I need to."

He looked at her for a moment and smiled faintly. "I like the way you work, Reverend. Stay back and don't let your feet get numb."

When Sergeant Hayes had photographed every mark in the snow, and the chief and Officer Flynn had gone over every branch and every tree for hairs and fibers, the paramedics skidded down the slope, dragging the pallet behind them. Clare watched as they conferred with the officers.

"Okay," someone said. "Let's do it. One . . . two . . . three . . ."

"Got 'er. Okay, okay. Let go now."

Russ detached himself from the group and hiked up the slope to Clare. The paramedics followed. The figure strapped onto the pallet looked like something out of a fairy tale—white skin and dark hair, a train of attendants.

Clare had been bracing herself for a disfigured death, but the body was more like a statue of a pretty, round-faced girl, asleep with her head fallen to one side. There were leaves frozen into her long hair. Clare looked at Russ. "May I touch her?" she asked.

He nodded. "Carefully. Don't move her." Clare made the sign of the cross on the girl's marble forehead, then spread her arms wide across the girl's body. "Depart, O soul, out of this world; in the name of the Creator who first made you; in the name of the Redeemer who ransomed you; in the name of the Sustainer who sanctifies you." She laid her hand across the girl's icy chest. "May your rest be in peace and your dwelling place in the Paradise of God."

Russ reached past one of the EMTs and pulled a blanket free from the foot of the pallet. He shook it out and laid it over the girl. "Okay," he said. "Let's all get out of here." Clare let Hayes and Flynn take the lead up the trail, following behind the paramedics and their burden. Russ fell into step beside her. "Don't believe in God, you know," he said.

"Mmmm hmmm," she said.

"Never saw any use for organized religion, either."

"No," she said.

"But I believe everybody deserves respect as a human being."

"Even the dead."

They trudged on silently. "Especially the dead," Russ said at last.

Clare nodded. "The last thing any of us can do for the dead is to show respect."

"No. The last thing we can do for the dead is give them justice."

She felt the sudden prickle of tears. "Yes," she said after she knew her voice would be steady. "We owe the dead justice."

CHAPTER THREE

THE Burnses' Range Rover was already parked in the lot across the street by the time Clare arrived to unlock the parish hall for their nine-o'clock meeting. Heading toward her in their casual coats, jeans, and sweaters, they looked like models in a J. Crew catalogue.

"Good morning," Clare said.

The Burnses returned her greeting, looking at her attire curiously. "Reverend Clare," Karen asked, "are you moonlighting with the police department?"

Clare plucked at the brown parka she was wearing. "Oh, this. Chief Van Alstyne loaned this to me last night. It's so much warmer than my coat, I'm tempted to permanently forget to return it."

"Shall we go inside?" Geoff asked. They scuffed their boots on the protective mats in the parish hall. Then Clare opened her door and let the Burnses precede her into her office.

"Oh, my," Karen said. They both looked around slowly. "It certainly is different from when Father Hames was here."

"Yes," Clare agreed, thinking of the unrelieved English-country style that had been her predecessor's office. "It's a nice space to display some of my collections." Over the fireplace she had hung an intricately carved fragment from a Spanish rood screen and olive-wood bas-reliefs from the Middle East. A pair of leather chairs that had originally furnished the admiral's wardroom of a World War II destroyer were pulled up cozily in front of the fireplace. To the left of the door a saggy love seat faced the leather chairs. "Please, sit down," Clare said, hanging her parka behind the door. The Burnses followed suit.

Clare sat in a leather chair. "Let's talk about this idea Chief Van Alstyne had for getting Cody into your foster care."

Geoff took the love seat. "Van Alstyne's idea? When he called me, it sounded like your idea. He made it pretty clear that the only reason he was behind it was to make sure we would let him know if Cody's mother contacted us."

"We were both thinking along the same lines, then."

Karen sat down in the other leather chair. "I talked to Chief Van Alstyne, too, and I'll tell you what I told him. There's nothing wrong or illegal about Geoff and me helping out Cody's birth mother."

"You've never dealt with DHS, Reverend Clare," Geoff said. "If they get their hands on the birth mother, they'll do everything in their power to persuade her to hang on to the baby. It doesn't

matter if she's underaged or if she lives in a dump. In their book, providing the egg and sperm for a child is more important than providing him with a good life. I'm sick of it."

Clare nodded. "Why do you think DHS hasn't given you Cody to foster at this time?"

"Because we've put up a stink before," Geoff said. "When they returned a baby girl we had been fostering to her abusive mother, we went to the press, we took them to court—"

"It was a nightmare," Karen said. "We've already filed suit requesting temporary custody of Cody, but we talked it over, and we do think it might be helpful to have members of the congregation write letters in our favor to DHS."

"Okay," Clare said. "At the end of my sermon tomorrow I'll ask the congregation for help. We'll need addresses that people can write to. We can just squeak it into the December newsletter if you can get the information to Lois by Monday." She paused. "I'd like to talk about the other half of this matter. Have you thought about what happens when Cody's mother shows up? From what I understand, the mothers in this sort of abandonment case are almost always caught or turn themselves in."

"That's why we need custody now," Geoff said. "We'll need to be able to argue that she is an unfit mother and that the child's best interests will be served by remaining with us."

"That's a little harsh, isn't it?"

"Reverend, finding a healthy white infant in this country is a harsh business. It's not for the squeamish or for people who aren't willing to play hardball."

"And besides, maybe the mother won't turn up," Karen said. Geoff and Clare both looked at her.

"That's an unrealistic attitude to take, Kar. We can't just cross our fingers and hope she's disappeared for good."

"Of course. You're right. It's just I believe that Cody is the one. I just know he's meant to be ours." Karen beamed.

"Then we'd better be prepared to do what we have to to ensure that he stays ours," Geoff said.

RUSS CONTEMPLATED THE OLD glass-fronted vending machine in the hallway between the coroner's office and the mortuary, where he was reluctantly spending his Saturday afternoon. EAT-A-TERIA it proclaimed in '50s lettering. HOT—COLD—TASTY—CONVENIENT! The idea of a limp mystery-meat sandwich was pretty unappealing, and he was thinking longingly of lunch at his mom's place when Dr. Dvorak came through the heavy wooden doors of the mortuary.

"Don't tell me you're going to eat some of that," the M.E. said.

Russ snorted. "It's your machine."

Dvorak shrugged off his lab coat and slung it over his arm as he headed up the hallway to his office. Russ fell into step alongside him. "I tell you, Chief, in seven years I don't think I've ever seen anyone refill that thing." Dvorak opened his door and sat down at a desk considerably neater than Russ's. "You didn't need to come here, you know. Right now all I have is my preliminary report."

"Of course I needed to come," Russ said. "A Jane Doe that's a possible murder? You're lucky I didn't sit in on the autopsy."

Dvorak looked askance. "Mmmm. The last time you did that—"

"Don't remind me. What do you know?"

"The basics. From her teeth, she's between sixteen and twenty-four. She was hit with a heavy blunt object at the base of her skull, crushing her medulla and causing hemorrhaging in her brain. It rendered her unconscious and could have led to her death eventually."

"Eventually?"

"My guess is she died of exposure. She hadn't been dead more than four hours before you found her. But her body temperature was very low, the sort of thing you see a day or so after death."

Russ nodded. "Her killer whacked her and then dumped her. And she froze to death. Did she ever regain consciousness?"

"No. The lab work should be back by Monday afternoon. Then I can let you know if there was any alcohol or drugs involved." The pathologist opened a folder and slid a paper across the desktop to Russ. "Here are her prints, dental profile, pictures for identification purposes. I hope for her family's sake you find out who she was quickly. She had a baby recently, poor thing."

"What?" Russ jerked his attention back to the doctor. "Damn. I was right. You sure?"

Dvorak gave him a quelling look. "Am I sure? Of course I'm sure. She's about a week postpartum. Why?"

"Because six days ago we found an abandoned infant we've been trying to place ever since. And when Jane Doe turned up, I had this feeling. You got her blood type?"

The doctor looked at his sheet. "AB positive."

"Hot damn. The baby is AB negative. That means she could be its mother, right?"

"Sure." Dr. Dvorak paused. "I take it this wasn't a hospital birth?"

"Not that we can track down, no."

"Well, if this girl gave birth to a baby with a different rhesus factor, and she didn't receive an antigen shot afterward, she'll have Rh antibodies swimming in her blood. I can test for that."

"Do it." Russ stood. "Would you give me a call when you have the results?"

The pathologist stood as well. "Of course." They shook hands.

Russ scooped up the folder Dvorak proffered him. The two men walked down the hall to the waiting room, where the entrance was. Bright sunshine spilled over the buffed wooden floorboards when Russ opened the door. "Warmed up. Must be over forty."

"Nice," the pathologist agreed. "Just don't count on it lasting."

WAITING her turn to recess down the center aisle behind the choir, Clare inspected the crowd. Right now several of her flock looked disapproving. It wasn't from her homily on Cody, she knew. It had segued nicely into her plea for help for the Burnses. And it was under fifteen minutes long, always a plus for a sermon.

No. This was definitely about the two police officers in the back of the church. After some hesitation Clare had agreed to allow Russ to show the Jane Doe photos to her congregation for possible identification. Russ seemed to feel that the connection to St. Alban's was their best lead so far. So, during announcements, Clare had outlined the situation and asked for everyone's cooperation with Chief Van

Alstyne, who had risen from his seat and nodded soberly to the crowd. There had been a buzz of conversation, cut short by the offertory and the celebration of the Eucharist.

The choir fanned out in two lines against the back of the church. Clare held the heavily embroidered floor-length cope—a literal mantle of priestly authority—out with one arm so she could turn. She drew a deep breath, letting the words come from a place deep inside herself. "Go in peace, to love and serve the Lord," she said, projecting her voice so that it echoed back enthusiastically from the stone walls. "Alleluia, alleluia!"

"Thanks be to God," the congregation responded. "Alleluia, alleluia!" It was a satisfying moment, even if all hell was about to break loose. A polite Episcopalian sort of hell, of course.

The choir members headed back up the aisles. Parishioners were drifting toward the parish hall, putting on coats, collecting squirming children. The din of voices made it hard to hear, so she nearly jumped when Russ spoke quietly in her ear.

"Nice sermon. In fact, the whole thing was cool. Very ritualistic."

"Isn't it? Come for one of the big feast days. You'll get to see me cense the altar."

"Uh-huh. Sounds interesting. So where should I . . . ?"

"I have to stay here and greet everyone leaving now. You head back to the parish hall, right through those doors there." She pointed to the front of the church. The officer Russ had brought with him slipped through the inner doorway into the vestibule of the church. He carried a plain manila folder.

"Okay." Russ tapped his own folder and pushed his way through the crowded center aisle, apparently not noticing the round-eyed glances directed at him. It must be hard being a cop, she thought. Always a hero or a bad guy, never just another human being.

After listening to the parishioners' complaints and gasps of horror, Clare made her way to the sacristy. She unknotted the cincture—a ropelike belt around her waist, symbolizing her vows—and removed her stole, kissing the embroidered cross at its center with a hasty reverence, then yanked the alb over her head and hung it up.

The door cracked open, admitting a hand holding a very full, very enticing sherry glass.

Lois sidled into the room. "I asked the refreshment ladies to bring up the sherry from the kitchen. I thought you might need it."

Clare held the glass to her nose and sniffed. "Ahhhh." She took a larger-than-recommended swallow. "God bless you, Lois."

"Is that official?"

"You bet. How's it going in there?"

"I heard a few comments about priests overstepping the bounds, but so far no one's used the phrase 'meddling woman.' "

"Oh, great."

"Chief Van Alstyne is being charming. He's really quite attractive, don't you think? All that tousled hair and those sexy lines at the corners of his eyes."

Clare laughed. "Just how much sherry have you had, Lois?"

"Don't worry," Lois said, floating back into the hall. "I'm sure there's enough left to rustle up another glass for you."

Clare followed Lois into the large, sunlit parish hall, where things did seem almost normal. She worked her way back to the white-draped refreshment table, greeting the people she knew by name and smiling at those she didn't know yet. Mae Bristol, as plump and pale as an over-risen bun, was serving up coffee and tea from the church's silver service. The sherry bottles were between the creamer and the coffee cups. They looked seriously depleted.

"This is stupid, Miss Bristol. My parents let me drink wine at home!" A slim girl in a fashionably skinny velvet dress leaned across the tablecloth. She reminded Clare of the girls at her old high school who looked like they were straight off the pages of *Seventeen* magazine. She could still remember feeling angular and unfeminine next to them, a girl whose fingernails were lined with grease because she'd been helping her dad with airplane maintenance. Clare reached around and snagged one of the sherry bottles.

"Then they can come over here and get a glass for you, Alyson. I'm not giving you any sherry, and that's final." The girl flipped her hair in annoyance and flounced away.

"The difficult age," Clare said, filling her glass to the top and handing the bottle back to Miss Bristol.

The elderly lady fixed Clare with her black-currant eyes. "That girl is spoiled rotten," she said. "I had her in my fourth-grade class, and she was spoiled then."

"Ah," Clare said. "Well." She turned away, spotting Russ standing by the door to the street. Casual, not obviously blocking it, but making it impossible to get past him without at least making an excuse. As she wended her way toward him through the crowd, careful not to spill any of her drink, Vaughn Fowler fell in beside her.

"Any luck with identifying the victim?" he asked.

"At the church door? No. Let's hope someone here can help."

Millers Kill's chief of police was smiling reassuringly to a young couple wrestling their two little girls into snowsuits. "I was wondering when you'd get over here," Russ said to Clare. "I wanted to wait for you before I started showing the pictures around." He looked keenly at Fowler. Clare introduced the two men.

"I recall reading about you in the *Post-Star* around the time you were appointed police chief, Van Alstyne. You were in the Eighty-ninth MP Brigade, weren't you? I was chief of staff at Fort Hood during their deployment there in '87."

The chief straightened slightly. "Yes, sir, I was in the Eighty-ninth." Clare bit back a smile. Evidently she wasn't the only one to have a hard time treating the colonel as a civilian. "I'm surprised you'd remember something like that," Russ went on.

"Military service is something I always look for. It's what makes a man." He pointed to Russ's folder. "You ready to start, Chief?"

"Yes, sir," Russ said.

"Then I might as well be the first."

Russ flipped open the folder. Four shots—face front, profiles, and full body, covered with an institutional green sheet.

"Sorry," Fowler said. "Don't know her." He frowned. "Where did you say it happened?"

"I didn't," Russ said. "We found her body just upstream from Payson's Park."

The colonel shook his head. "Sorry I can't be of any help."

"Thank you, anyway," Russ said.

Fowler nodded, slipping on his overcoat. When he opened the door, the sunlight flooded the parish hall, drawing glances from the rest of the room.

Clare held up her hands. "May I have your attention, please? For those of you willing to help with the police investigation, Chief Van Alstyne is ready to have you look at the photographs. I know it's an unpleasant task, but it's important that we all do our part to help the police catch whoever is responsible for this crime. Thank you."

There was a surge of bodies toward them. "Good heavens," Clare murmured. "They don't seem to be too horrified at the prospect of autopsy shots, do they?"

"Reality TV," Russ whispered. He raised his voice. "If you could form a line there, we can get you all out of here quickly."

It was a repeat of the earlier scene in the vestibule of the church: the same exclamations, expressions of sympathy, philosophical mutterings. No one recognized her. The tedium of the process reminded Clare that police work was a lot like combat: hours of boredom punctuated by moments of sheer terror.

"Oh, my God!" The squeal brought her back to the scene at hand. Alyson stood in front of Russ, flanked by two well-dressed adults. "I know her! That's Katie McWhorter! I know her!"

CHAPTER FOUR

CLARE had offered her office to the Shatthams, figuring it would be a comfortable spot for their daughter to talk with the police chief, but they were insistent that Clare be there for Alyson's statement, so the five of them wound up clustered around the massive table in the vestry meeting room. Maybe the Shatthams hoped Clare would put

the fear of God into Alyson, who, after her first outburst, had reassumed her pose of pseudosophistication and contempt.

The girl sat with her parents on either side of her. Russ sat directly opposite, leaving the chair at the head of the table for Clare.

"Katie McWhorter," he said. "What can you tell me about her?"

"She was just a girl who went to school with me, that's all," Alyson said. "She graduated last year."

"Did she stay in town after she graduated?"

The girl shifted in her seat. "She went off to college. Somewhere. I'm not sure. It's not like we were friends or anything."

"No?"

"No. She was, like, living somewhere around Depot Street. My parents sure don't want me going there."

"Who did she hang with, Alyson? Before she went to college."

"Nobody much. She was a brainiac, so she knew a lot of the geeks. I know she had a job at the Infirmary." She paused, frowning. "She had a boyfriend."

"A boyfriend?" Russ asked with no particular emphasis.

"Yeah. Ethan Stoner. They were, like, a weird combination, what with her being a brain and him being a head. He was held back a year; otherwise he would have graduated last year with Katie."

"Had you seen her since she went away to school?"

"Had I seen her? What do you mean?"

Clare couldn't tell if her voice was strained because she knew more than she was letting on or because she was just hostile to Russ's authority. "Did you see her back in Millers Kill at any time?"

"No. But like I said, we weren't friends." Alyson looked at her parents. "Can I go now? I really don't know anything else."

"Can you think of any reason, anything at all, why someone might have wanted Katie dead?"

"God, no. I think it must be one of those random violence things, don't you? Some stranger raping and murdering the first girl he can lure into his car?" She shuddered dramatically.

Her mother whimpered. "Chief Van Alstyne, do we need to be worried about the safety of our daughter?"

"My God, what if it's one of those serial killers?" Mr. Shattham put his arm around his daughter's thin shoulders.

"I can't rule out a stranger killing in this case," Russ said, "but I doubt that's what we have here. And Katie was never raped." He folded his fingers together. "She had recently had a baby, though."

Alyson's mouth dropped open. "What?" she finally choked out. It was the first genuine emotion Clare had seen from the girl since she laid eyes on the photos.

"The doctor who autopsied her says she gave birth within the last two weeks."

Alyson's face stilled, only a small frown marring the blankness of hard thought. "It must have been Ethan," she said finally. "He knocked her up and then killed her."

"Why do you say that?" Russ leaned back in his chair.

"Like, who else would it be? He was seriously in love with her. Maybe he wanted her to marry him, and she wouldn't."

"Alyson," Russ asked, "do you know Katie's parents' address?"

"No. She has a big sister, though—Kristen. She works at Fleet Bank as a teller. I know because that's our bank."

"Okay, Alyson." Russ gathered up the photos and closed the folder. "Thank you for your cooperation. You've been a big help."

"I can go? I'm done?"

"That's right." He turned to Alyson's parents. "Mr. and Mrs. Shattham, thank you."

Clare rose from her seat. "Let me walk you out," she said to the Shatthams. They got up and preceded her into the hall. Somehow she assumed Russ would remain behind, sitting in the sunlight, thinking. Probably the same way he was assuming she'd come back to talk things over with him.

When Clare returned, she sat down in the seat where Alyson had been sitting. "So," she said. "What do you think?"

"What do you think?" Russ countered.

"I think Alyson's not being entirely honest. I can't say why. It was just . . . something off."

"Mmmm. I agree. You notice that we still don't know what

Katie's connection to St. Alban's is. Alyson only mentioned knowing her from school. Maybe that's what she's hiding."

"Why, though? I mean, if you consider Alyson as a suspect, what possible motive could she have?"

"Jealousy? Rivalry?"

"They moved in entirely different circles, it sounds like. I remember Ethan Stoner from Friday. I find it hard to believe that even cleaned up and sober, he'd appeal to Alyson."

"No. Ethan Stoner. I hate to think he could do something as bad as this. He was awful edgy and upset that night."

"Are you going to go out and talk to him this afternoon?"

"No. I want more information first. I'm going to find Katie's parents if I can, or her sister. Get a handle on who she was."

"What do you mean, find her parents if you can? There can't be that many McWhorters on or around Depot Street."

"You haven't seen the area. It's our own quaint, rural version of a rat-infested slum. Mostly six- or eight- or ten-unit apartment buildings, falling down around the tenants' ears. Half the residents don't have telephones."

"Well, we can check the phone book for McWhorters anyway," Clare said as she stood up and went to her office. She returned with the Millers Kill directory, which she paged through. "No McWhorters listed for that area. Now what?"

"Tomorrow morning I'll go to the bank and see if I can find the sister. The best way to a positive ID will be to have a family member identify her at the morgue."

"Would you like me to come along to the bank? Or to the morgue? To be there when you break the news to Katie's sister?"

"To what, comfort her? This wouldn't have anything to do with you wanting to be in on the investigation, would it?"

"I'm already in on the investigation," Clare pointed out. "This simply lets me hear what she has to say firsthand. And if you'd like, I could help you tell her what happened to her sister. I'm— I took a course in grief work at the seminary."

"Well, I never took any course, but I've broken this kind of news

enough times to know what to do. The trick is to not leave 'em hanging—get to the worst of it fast."

GET to the worst of it fast, Russ reminded himself. He arrived at the bank Monday morning at nine o'clock, found the branch manager first off, and filled her in on the situation. She invited him to use her office when he told Kristen the bad news; then she left for the service counter and came back with a young woman in tow.

"Kristen McWhorter?" Russ asked. The branch manager silently shut the door behind herself on the way out.

"Yes," Kristen said, frowning. She was pretty, in a milkmaid sort of way that even her punk hairstyle and thick black eyeliner couldn't conceal. "Did my father do something?" she asked.

"Your father? No. I have some very bad news for you, Kristen. This past Friday we discovered your sister Katie's body near the kill, upstream from Payson's Park. She had been murdered."

Kristen stood perfectly still, blinking. "No," she said. "You're mistaken. Katie's in Albany. She's a freshman at SUNY Albany, and she hasn't been home since school started. She's in Albany."

"She was identified in a photograph by someone who knew her in high school. We'd like you or your parents to view the body to make a positive identification."

"I'll go. I'll go right now. It's not Katie. You have the wrong person. But I have to talk with Rosaline about getting off."

Russ gestured through the glass walls at the manager. "I've already spoken with your boss, Kristen. Everything's set."

The manager came in carrying a heavy coat and a purse. "I brought these from the break room. They're Kristen's."

Kristen grabbed at the purse and started scrabbling through it. "Wait! Wait! I can prove to you it isn't Katie. I can call her house. I have her number." She dug through the purse and fished out a plastic address book. "Here. Her number's here." She walked to the phone on the laminate desk and hammered out the number.

"C'mon. C'mon," she said. "Pick up." Her face brightened. "Emily!" she said. "It's Kristen, Katie's sister. Can I speak to

Katie?" There was a pause. "Is she in class?" There was an even longer pause. Kristen's eyes filled with tears. She looked up at Russ. "She says Katie took a bus to Millers Kill on Friday morning. She hasn't seen her since." She blinked, and the tears spilled over her cheeks. "Oh, God. Oh, God."

Russ held out his hand for the receiver. "Let me talk with her," he said. Kristen surrendered the phone. "Hello, this is Russ Van Alstyne, Millers Kill Police. Who is this, please?"

"I'm Emily Colbaum. Katie's housemate." The voice on the other end of the line was shaky. "Has something happened?"

"I'm sorry, Miss Colbaum. We believe Katie was killed Friday night. Can I ask you a few—"

The sound of wailing cut him off. He waited. Kristen was leaning against the branch manager, mopping her eyes with a wad of damp tissues. She had black makeup smeared on her cheeks.

Russ tried the phone again. "Miss Colbaum? I'm going to give you the number of the police station here in Millers Kill. You got a pen and paper? . . . Good girl." He told her his direct office line. "If you think of anything, anything at all, call that number."

Emily blubbed a watery thank-you and hung up.

Kristen was gamely struggling her way into her coat, crying soundlessly. Russ held the office door open for her. "Kristen, don't worry about coming in to work tomorrow," the manager said. "Take all the time you need." She hugged the girl awkwardly.

Outside, it was another bitterly cold and clear day. When they reached the morgue's parking lot, Clare was already there, waiting in her cherry-red MG. She got out as Russ parked the cruiser.

"Let's get inside before we do introductions," he yelled across the lot. She nodded and disappeared into the building, climbing the steps two at a time. He held Kristen's arm until they got to the waiting room, then released her to help her out of her coat.

"Kristen?" Clare took the girl's coat from Russ and tossed it onto a chair. "I'm Clare Fergusson." She held out a hand to Kristen, who took it mechanically. "I was there when your sister's body was discovered." Kristen's lips quivered. "I'm also a priest." Russ went to

the window separating the waiting room from records storage. Tapping the bell three times brought the morgue attendant, who went to unlock the inner doors. "Would you like me to come with you?" Clare went on, gently leading Kristen to the hallway. "Sometimes it can make it less scary to be with someone else."

Kristen stopped, looked into Clare's face. "I've never seen a body before," she said. "Isn't that strange?"

"No, not strange at all," Clare said.

The attendant paused at a small desk outside the body storage room. "We're here to identify the Jane Doe," Russ said quietly.

The attendant made a note in the logbook. "She's in number three," he said. "You can go in alone, or I could come with you."

Kristen shook her head at the young man and took hold of Clare's arm. "Will you come?" she asked. "I forgot your name."

"I'm Clare. Yes, I'll come with you."

The attendant opened the door. Russ caught a glimpse of white tile and harsh fluorescent lighting before the door closed again, Clare and Kristen on the other side. It was a lousy place for a person to end up, laid out naked in a stainless steel drawer. He stilled his breathing, forcing himself not to get impatient.

Finally Clare pushed the door back open, letting Kristen pass through first. The girl looked into Russ's eyes. "It's her. It's my sister." She bit down hard on her lip. "I thought— I thought she'd finally be safe once she was away in Albany. Why did she come back?" Fresh tears rose in her eyes. "Why did she come back?"

"KRISTEN, what did you mean when you said you thought your sister would be safe once she was away at school?" Russ handed her a mug of black coffee.

Kristen bent over it until her face was almost obscured by steam. "Nothing. I don't know. I don't know what I was thinking."

He handed another mug to Clare. She was sitting kitty-corner to Kristen, a Millers Kill PD tape recorder at her left. After Kristen had identified her sister's body, she agreed to give her statement at the police station, where Harlene, in full mother-hen mode, had

fussed over her, fetching coffee and strudel from the dispatch room.

The young woman put down her mug and smoothed her hands over her face. She had washed up in the bathroom, and without her makeup she looked like one of the pretty country girls from up the hills past Cossayaharie.

"Can you tell me how she died?"

Russ sat down. "She was hit in the back of the head by something heavy—hard enough to make her unconscious. Then she was rolled downhill, to the edge of the kill. The medical examiner believes she died of hypothermia, that she never woke up."

"How did she get out there? Do you know?"

"Only that it was a four-wheel-drive vehicle. We don't know if your sister was conscious when she reached the trail or if her killer drove her there after she had been knocked out."

Kristen frowned. "Was she molested?"

"No," Russ said. He glanced at Clare.

"There is something else, Kristen," Clare said. "Katie had a baby within the past two weeks. We have strong reason to believe that she, or someone, left him on the back steps of St. Alban's Church a week ago. He's in foster care right now."

"He?"

"A little boy, yes. She left a note, naming him Cody."

Kristen's face contorted. "Oh, she always loved that name." She squeezed her eyes, trying to stifle tears. "I can't believe Katie would give her baby away. I can't believe it. Unless he made her!"

"Who made her, Kristen?"

She was crying openly now, shaking her head. "Our father."

Clare looked at Russ. "Your father would've made her give up her child because she wasn't married?" she asked.

"No, no." Kristen took a shaky breath. "My father would have forced her to give it up if he was its father."

Russ felt as if someone had thrown a bucket of icy water over him.

Clare was pale, but calm. "Kristen, what are you saying? Did your father sexually abuse Katie?"

Kristen pushed her hands through her hair. "I don't know. I

really don't know. But he used to do it to me. It's hard to talk about."

"Listen, Kristen," Russ said. "You don't have to be afraid of your father. Give me his name and address, and he'll be in the county jail before five o'clock."

"No, please!" Kristen said. "I don't want to press charges. I got away, and that's all I wanted. I thought Katie had escaped, too."

Clare held out her hand. "Take my hand and tell me. If it gets too hard, just squeeze as tightly as you can."

The girl tentatively placed her hand in the priest's. "Okay. I'll try." She shut her eyes. "My father started in on me when I was fourteen. Katie would have been twelve. I knew that what he was doing was wrong. But I was afraid to tell anyone, because without him, how would we live? He doesn't work, but he's got disability and Social Security money. Mom was useless. She would have denied he was fooling with me, and besides, she would have fallen apart without him. So I just . . . hung on until I finished high school so I could get a decent job, make enough money to live on."

"For four years?" Clare asked quietly.

"Uh-huh. I started working at the bank the day after I graduated, and as soon as I had my first paycheck, I was out of there. I begged Katie to come with me, but she wouldn't. She said Mom needed her." She bit down on her lip. "She was so smart; she wanted a college degree more than anything."

"You never saw any signs of her pregnancy?" Russ asked.

She shook her head. "She went to Albany in June, right after she graduated. The university had given her a work-study job in the computer center, and they needed her there for the summer."

"The girl who first identified Katie said she had a boyfriend, Ethan Stoner. Could he be Cody's father?"

"Ethan? Jeez, that's hard to imagine. They did go out in high school, but Katie broke it off senior year."

"She broke it off? How did Ethan take that?"

"I don't know. Probably not too well. Katie was more than anything he had in his life. I know she didn't break up with him over any bad feelings. She just felt they had really grown apart."

"Kristen," Russ said, "why do you think it was your father who got Katie pregnant and not Ethan?"

She raised her eyes to meet his. "I can't imagine Ethan getting violent with Katie. But I can picture my father doing it. He's evil. He could have killed Katie and gone home and slept like a baby."

THE chief of police stared up at the windows of number 162 South Street from the relative warmth of his car. He had been to this address many times before, though never to the apartment of Darrell McWhorter. Unlike his neighbors, who beat each other up where everybody could see, McWhorter did his lawbreaking in private.

Russ opened the door, wincing as the cold stung his eyes. He crossed the sidewalk, opened the chain-link gate, and walked up to the front door. He ran his finger down a double row of tarnished door buzzers. MCWHORTER: 4A. He pressed the bell and waited.

"What is it?" a voice crackled indistinctly over the intercom.

"Mr. McWhorter? Chief Van Alstyne, Millers Kill Police. I need to speak with you, please. It's about your daughter Katie."

"Katie?" The voice sounded surprised. The buzzer rang, cracking the front door open. Russ climbed the stairs to the fourth floor. The door was open when he reached the landing.

"What is it about Katie?" Darrell McWhorter was no more than five ten, squared off, with the look of a high school jock run to flab. He looked unremarkable, the kind of guy you'd pass a hundred times in the A&P and never think, That one's screwing his own daughter.

Russ tamped down the heat behind his eyes. "May I come in?" he asked.

"Sure, sure. Come on in," McWhorter said, stepping aside. The apartment reeked of cigarette smoke, but it was well kept. The furniture had the look of family hand-me-downs rather than Goodwill.

Russ turned to face him. "Is your wife here, Mr. McWhorter?"

"Yeah, yeah. She's in the bedroom. Brenda!" he yelled down the darkened hallway. "There's a cop here with news about Katie."

"About Katie?" An enormous woman lumbered up the hall. "What about my little girl?" She looked like her daughters, but blown up to Macy's-parade size, with a fleshy mask through which once pretty eyes peered suspiciously.

Get to the worst of it fast, he thought. "I have very bad news for you folks. Your daughter Katie McWhorter was found dead out past Payson's Park last Friday night." Darrell McWhorter stared at him blankly. Brenda McWhorter screamed.

"My baby! My baby!" She staggered, and her husband caught her under her arms and hefted her onto a Victorian sofa. A man would have to be pretty damn strong to help get that woman up. Russ wondered what sort of disability kept him from working.

"How did it happen?" Darrell McWhorter asked.

Russ recounted what they knew about Katie's death. Brenda McWhorter continued wailing. "There's one more important thing I have to tell you," he concluded. "Katie had a child within a week or so of her death. DHS has custody of the baby right now."

Brenda's wails cut off abruptly. Darrell looked as if he were trying to get the final *Jeopardy!* answer. "A baby?" he said.

"A little boy. Did either of you know she was pregnant?"

Brenda shook her head, her mouth still half open.

"Do either of you know what connection Katie might have had to St. Alban's Church?"

"St. Alban's?" Darrell still looked as if he wasn't going to make the buzzer before Alex Trebek called time. "How come?"

"Katie, or someone, left the baby on the back steps of St. Alban's, with a note directing that the boy go to the Burnses, a couple from the church that've been looking to adopt. Would you or Katie have known them some other way? They're lawyers in town."

Darrell reached for a pack of cigarettes. "These lawyers go to that fancy church?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, they do."

"But they don't got the baby yet?"

"No. There are legal issues to sort out. For instance, we don't know who the father of the child is." Russ fixed Darrell with a level

stare. "I had a long talk with her sister this morning, who told me Katie broke up with her boyfriend. Kristen hadn't heard of anyone else who might have been going out with Katie."

Darrell lit a cigarette. "Can't put much store by what Kristen says. We wouldn't help her with money after she was out of school, and since then, she's been bad-mouthing us."

"Never comes to see us," his wife chimed in. "Not in two years."

"Had either of you seen Katie recently?"

"Nope," Darrell said. Brenda shook her head.

"Where were you two last Friday?"

"We went out to the Dew Drop Inn for a few. Met up with some friends. We must've been there until eleven o'clock."

"You wouldn't happen to remember the names of the friends you were with, would you?" He tried to make his question as inoffensive as possible.

"Sure we do," Darrell said. "Dave and Tessa Jackson. You wanna phone number so you can check up on them or something?"

"That won't be necessary," Russ said, omitting the "yet." He paused. "What kind of car do you drive, Mr. McWhorter?"

"Huh? An '80 Ford Ranger pickup." He ground the cigarette stub out in an ashtray. "So why do you need to find the father, anyway?" he asked.

"The father has rights to the child. More important, we're working on the theory that the man who fathered Katie's child either killed her or has knowledge that could lead to her murderer."

"And if the father ain't found, we're the closest relatives, right?" Darrell's eyes lit up.

The thought of placing a baby with this pair started the acid sizzling in Russ's stomach. "Right," he said.

"So we should get custody of the boy, right?"

At this, Darrell's wife frowned. "Honey, we're kinda old to be having a baby around again."

"Naw, naw, that baby belongs to us. How do we get ahold of the people who got him now?"

Russ pulled one of his cards out of his breast pocket. "I'll write

down the number at DHS you can call." He leaned over an oblong table, fishing for his pen. "The other side of this card has my number on it. Call me if you think of anything that might have slipped your mind. I know it's been a shock." Though they seemed to have recovered mighty quick.

"We'll call DHS right away and see about that little boy," Darrell said. "It'll be just like having a piece of Katie back with us again."

Clumping down the stairs, Russ wondered what the McWhorters would want with Cody. The monthly foster-child support check from the state? What if Darrell's tastes ran to little boys? It was a stretch, but still . . . Either Russ convinced Kristen to make a complaint against Darrell McWhorter or he had better find another candidate as the baby's father. Because if he didn't, Cody would be sentenced to poverty and neglect. Or worse.

RUSS'S wave of determination to help Cody broke apart on that jagged rock of modern life, the telephone answering machine. He tried to reach Kristen at her apartment and was met with a blast of unintelligible music that sounded like jackhammers destroying a guitar shop. St. Alban's office had on a machine, too, asking him to call between the hours of eight thirty and three.

Russ weighed the idea of paging Clare but decided against it. Instead, he left a message describing his meeting with the McWhorters and asked her to call him back. He tried the DHS office next, only to get caught up in a voicemail system. He banged the receiver down and unloaded a piece of army vocabulary on the person who had first replaced an operator with a machine.

He stomped into the dispatch room, hoping Harlene would ask him what was wrong, but she wasn't there. Russ pulled his knit cap firmly over his head, then went out into the cold. Thank God he had the Ford pickup tonight, with its fast-working heater. He'd stop at his mother's and wangle a dinner invitation for later in the week, when Linda was away on her buying trip to the city.

It was out of the way, but he drove by the rectory just to make

sure everything was all right. The lights were off. Had he left Clare his number so she could reach him? Yeah, he had. His dashboard clock glowed. Jeez, he'd better hurry home, or he'd miss dinner.

CLARE bowed her head. "Lord God," she said, "for the blessings of food and fellowship we are about to receive, make us truly thankful. We ask this in Jesus' name, Amen."

"Amen," the rest of the room said. The silence was broken by the clatter of utensils and the sound of eleven voices, all asking to pass this and that at the same time.

The first Monday of the month was the Foyers dinner, an informal gathering of members of the parish. Tonight's meal was at the home of Chris Ellis and his wife, Anne Vining-Ellis. Anne was a physician practicing in Glens Falls, and everyone referred to her as Dr. Anne. The Ellises and their three teenage boys were practically neighbors of Clare's, only three blocks away. One of the boys, pressed into service as a waiter, shambled back and forth from the kitchen to the tables on overlarge feet.

Dr. Anne was sitting on her right, and Clare could feel the tension that had caught in her shoulders dissipating under the stream of culinary critiques and gossip. "The only thing that could make this any better would be a cold beer," she murmured.

"That's definitely the missing element, isn't it?" Dr. Anne passed Clare a basket of rolls.

"We had sangria at the Foyers dinner I went to during the selection process in August," Clare said. "It was a barbecue at the Fowlers'."

"Oh, my Lord, and you had to listen to Vaughn speechifying about the charm, intelligence, and record-breaking success of his son, did you?" She rolled her eyes. "Me, I figure if the police aren't actively looking for my sons, they're doing okay." She laughed. "Oh, come here, darling, say hello to Reverend Fergusson." Dr. Anne snagged her son as he shuffled past. "This is my oldest boy, Anderson." The teen ducked his head awkwardly and mumbled hello. "Anderson's in his last year of school at Millers Kill High. When

he's done, we're throwing him out of the house and forcing him to support himself as a karaoke singer in nightclubs."

"Ma!" the boy protested. "She says that because I'm in the drama society. I'm going to Brown," he told Clare.

"Congratulations. That's a great university. It'll be a big change from Millers Kill High School, won't it?" she asked.

"You bet. Hey, they were talking about our church today at school. It was all over the place that Ethan Stoner killed his old girlfriend and Alyson Shattham identified her from a picture right in St. Alban's!"

"What?" Clare looked from Dr. Anne to her son. "Anderson, there's no evidence that Ethan Stoner killed anyone. The police are looking for anybody who might have information on the case."

"That's not how I heard it. It sounded like the cops were ready to haul Ethan into jail. You mean someone else might have done it?"

"I think we'll have to see what Chief Van Alstyne comes up with before we can make any reasonable guesses," Clare said.

Anderson pounded his fist against his forehead. "I should have known Alyson was exaggerating about Ethan." He looked at his mother. "She never got it that the reason she was in with everyone last year was because she was going out with Wesley."

"Wesley Fowler, he-who-walks-on-water," Dr. Anne added.

"Ma!"

"Okay, okay. Wes is a perfectly nice boy who helped you a lot last year in the plays you were in together. I suppose it's not his fault his father made a golden statue of him and put it on his front lawn."

"Ma, you are so weird," the boy said, and scuffled off.

Dr. Anne leaned toward Clare. "So tell me, Reverend, do you have the inside scoop on this murder?"

Clare took a bite of her roll. "I don't know much more than you do. Hard to believe something like this happened here, isn't it?"

Dr. Anne shook her head. "After thirteen years working the emergency rooms, I've seen way too much to think we're invulnerable just because we're small. That's the hard part, that you can't blame some 'other' when awful things happen. The 'other' is always one of us."

CHAPTER FIVE

RUSS picked up his receiver. Put it down. Picked it up. Put it down. "What the heck are you doing in there?" Harlene yelled from the dispatch room.

"Are you spying on me?" he yelled back.

"I can see the active light on the phone, you cranky old buzzard," she said, appearing in his doorway.

He tapped the folded legal papers lying next to the crumpled remains of his lunch bag. "Judge Ryswick gave me the warrants."

"For the blood tests on McWhorter and the Stoner boy? Good. Why don't you go on out and serve 'em, then?"

He sighed. "I want to talk to Cody's caseworker at DHS first. If this test clears McWhorter as the baby's father, he and his wife will get Cody faster than you can say 'closest living relative.' "

"So tell them about Kristen."

"I don't know if I can! She won't make a complaint against her father. I can't tell them if she won't back it up."

"Let them know Grandpa McWhorter is under criminal investigation and that you have a warrant—which means Judge Ryswick thought you had probable cause—to test his blood and see if he's the baby's father. That alone should tell them to put the brakes on changing the baby's custody. You don't need to mention Kristen."

"Harlene, you're right!"

"Uh-huh. Like usual."

"Why don't you leave that switchboard and become an officer?"

"Because you need a mastermind sitting here more than you need another uniform out there. Besides, I look terrible-bad in brown."

CLARE was making her regular round of Tuesday home visits when Karen Burns paged her, asking for a meeting. As soon as she

could get away, Clare hurried to the Burnses' office, a brand-new post-and-beam structure that looked as if it had been lifted straight from the pages of *Architectural Digest.*

"Reverend Clare!" Karen strode across the reception-room floor, her hands outstretched. "I'm glad you could make it on such short notice. Come into my office, please. Geoff is still stuck in court."

Karen Burns's office was clean and spare, with Shaker-style furnishings. Clare sat across from the desk.

"Can I get you some coffee? Tea? Water?" Karen was too elegant a woman to actually bustle, but she was close to it now.

"Karen," Clare said, "sit down. Tell me what's happened."

"Oh, God." Karen exhaled, collapsing in her chair. "We got a call this morning from a man named Darrell McWhorter. He claims to be Cody's grandfather and said that he had already talked to DHS and was pressing for custody of the baby."

Clare shook her head. "I'm sorry. I should have called yesterday. Yes, he is Cody's biological grandfather. Why was he calling you?"

Karen sat bolt upright. "He wanted us to buy Cody, that's why."

"What!"

"Oh, he didn't come right out and say it. He's smart enough to know that baby selling is against the law."

"You didn't— You didn't agree, did you?"

"God, no. If it ever got out, it would render any adoption null and void. We'd face jail, the loss of our licenses . . . no." She paused. "But we did ask him to meet with us tomorrow and see if we could try to work out some sort of . . . accommodation."

Clare frowned. "What sort of accommodation, Karen?"

Karen leaned forward. "We need your help. We can't pay the man off. But I thought, What if Geoff and I make a large donation to the church, dedicated to helping lower-income residents of Millers Kill? And what if one of the recipients of this aid is McWhorter?"

"What? You're asking me to make the church your money launderer?" Clare stood up, pushing the chair away. "No. I won't do it. It's immoral." Karen looked up at her, stricken. Clare sat back down. "Karen," she said more gently, "I know how much you want

that baby. But this— This wouldn't work. I'll do everything I can to help you. Let's set up a meeting with McWhorter. We'll offer him what assistance you can legally and ethically provide. That's the carrot. Then we show him the stick."

WHEN Russ turned his cruiser onto Main Street at the end of a long day, his lights picked out Clare's MG half in and half out of the police station's driveway. Grinning, he pulled up behind the little car and gave it a hit of his flashers. The door opened, and the Reverend Clare Fergusson got out, reluctantly turned around, and spread-eagled against the side of her car. Russ was laughing so hard it took him two tries to find his seat-belt latch.

"What are you doing here?" he asked once he had managed to get out of his cruiser.

"I was dropping by, and my dang car got stuck."

He looked down at the scant two inches of snow and ice the plow had thrown up on the lip of the driveway. "You gotta get yourself a real car for this climate. Not a windup toy like that one."

"This car," she told him, "is a marvel of precision engineering. It can drive a mountain road at sixty miles an hour without a shimmy across the yellow line."

"Yeah? Well, if I ever catch it doing that, it can also get impounded. C'mon. I'll help you push it out." He braced himself against the back fender. Clare leaned into the edge of the door, one hand on the wheel. "Okay. Push," Russ said. They heaved together. The MG slid over the low snowbank and rolled forward a foot.

"Why don't you park that thing," Russ said. "Let me get the cruiser in, and I'll stand you a cup of coffee."

"Any of Harlene's strudel left?"

"I might be able to rustle something up."

In the briefing room, with two mugs at hand and nothing left of the last slice of strudel except crumbs, Russ told Clare he'd obtained the warrants for McWhorter's and Ethan Stoner's blood tests. Then he described delivering the warrant to Darrell McWhorter. "You should have seen him. So cool. He drove himself over to the

hospital, with me following, got his blood drawn, and went home."

"That doesn't sound like a man who's afraid the test will show something incriminating."

"AB negative. Same as Katie's."

"And Cody's father has to be Rh positive, doesn't he?"

"You've got it. I spoke to a caseworker at DHS and told her about the warrant, but she said after the home study was completed, they could only delay giving Cody to his grandparents as long as the question of whether McWhorter had been abusing Katie remained open."

"But if he's not Cody's father, there isn't any evidence of that."

"Right. It'll be a happy family reunion."

"I found out why McWhorter is so eager to get his hands on Cody." Russ's eyebrows went up. Clare told him about the offer to the Burnses and the meeting scheduled for tomorrow.

"You really think you can convince this guy to allow the Burnses to adopt the baby?"

"I don't know. It's worth a try."

"Be careful, okay? I don't like the idea of you drawing McWhorter's attention. We don't know what he's capable of."

"He sounds like a bully to me, plain and simple." Clare propped her chin on her fist. "Besides, if the blood tests show nothing, he'll be out of the running as a suspect in the murder, right?"

"Well . . . I'll have to drop him back to third place. I haven't forgotten the Burnses."

Clare waved her hand dismissively. "You don't seriously think they did it. You're thinking it was Ethan."

"Yeah," he admitted.

"Are you going to serve him the warrant to test his blood type tonight?" she asked, glancing out into the darkness.

"No. I have to get Linda on the six-fifteen train. There's a big fabric convention in New York." He paused. "I'll drive over to the Stoners' farm tomorrow, bring him in then for questioning."

"You're not worried he might take off someplace?"

Russ shook his head. "His whole life's right here. All his family and friends. Where's he gonna go?"

"MR. MCWHORTER, KAREN and Geoff can't solve your problems for you. But they can help prevent further problems." Clare took a deep breath. The Burnses shifted on her small office sofa, obviously frustrated with McWhorter's sad narrative about his financial woes and his declarations of affection for his dear, departed Katie. Karen and Geoff had outlined the benefits they could give Cody; McWhorter countered with how ashamed the boy would be of his poor grandparents, eating beans and rice when the money ran low. They had tried the carrot. Now it was time for the stick.

"What further problems?" McWhorter said.

Clare rose from her chair. "Are you aware of the cost of rearing a child these days, Mr. McWhorter?" She handed McWhorter a paper. "Diapers, formula, medical visits—that's going to be a sizable chunk for a couple living on disability and a pension."

She dropped another paper into his lap. "And here's the monthly stipend you'll be getting as foster parents. Falls a little short of the expenses, doesn't it? Unless your pension stretches quite a bit further, you or your wife will have to go back to work." McWhorter shuffled through the papers, frowning.

"You'll be taking on a big responsibility, Mr. McWhorter, a big, expensive, time-consuming responsibility. And we'll make sure you're doing your job." She smiled blindingly. "We all feel connected to Cody here at St. Alban's. So we'll be keeping an eye on him—dropping by to see how he's doing, talking to the neighbors. Chief Van Alstyne is interested, too, and I'll bet he'd be happy to arrange for police drive-bys every day."

"You're threatening me, aren't you? I'm being threatened by a priest and a couple of rich lawyers."

Clare looked at him levelly. "I never threaten, Mr. McWhorter. You have a chance to save yourself considerable trouble and to do the right thing for your grandson. Why don't you take it?"

McWhorter looked at the papers on his lap. "Maybe. I'll talk it over with my wife. She had her heart set on having that baby come live with us, you understand."

"She can visit with Cody as much as she wants," Karen said.

McWhorter rose, and they all rose with him. "Maybe." He headed into the hallway, Clare and the Burnses close on his heels. He stopped in front of the parish family bulletin board, looking at the snapshots of congregants and their families. As he studied the photographs, Clare felt the back of her neck prickle. Something about the way McWhorter was acting didn't fit with a man who had been closed into a corner. "Why don't we all—" she began.

McWhorter shifted to face them. "I don't think so."

"What?" Karen's voice was polite but shaky.

"I've thought about it, and I can't give him up. He's the only thing I have left of my Katie. He stays with me and my wife."

"Wait!" Karen said. "Maybe we can work something out! What if we got you a new car so you could drive over to see Cody?"

She tried to follow McWhorter, snapping to a halt when her husband jerked her upper arm. "Stop it, Karen," he said. "Let him go."

"Wait," she said. "Wait!" McWhorter reached for the doors. "Damn you!" Karen's voice thickened. "Damn you!" Clare put her arm around the other woman. Together, she and Geoff held Karen tightly as her body heaved with the effort to expel tears and venom. "I could kill you, you bastard!" she shouted after the vanished man. She laid her head against her husband, weeping with rage. "I could kill him," she whispered. "I could kill him."

A MIDWEEK drive up to Cossayaharie usually relaxed Russ. Although Millers Kill policed this rural township, he seldom patrolled it himself. So his associations with the area were mostly good ones: visits to his sister's farm, fishing up at the lake. He passed a dense stand of spruce and hemlock; then the scenery opened up onto sprawling, uneven grazing fields. He drove past sleeping apple orchards, modern feed silos, and century-old barns.

At the Stoners' farm, he crunched into the drive, relieved to see Ethan's old pickup by the road leading toward the cow barn. Mindy Stoner came out on the porch, wiping her hands on a dishcloth. "Russ," she said, "what brings you up this way?" She was a tall, rawboned woman in her forties.

"I'm afraid I'm here on business, Mindy. Can I come in?"

She looked back toward the kitchen, then opened the door. Russ scraped the slush off his boots and followed her into the kitchen. Their thirteen-year-old was sitting at the table, doing homework. "Hannah," Mindy said, "run up to the barn and tell your father Chief Van Alstyne's here and needs to speak with him."

The girl gaped. "Is Daddy in trouble?"

Russ shook his head. "No. But I am going to have to speak with Ethan, too."

"He's out in the barn with Wayne, hooking up for the milking. Hannah, fetch 'em both in."

At the mention of her brother's name the girl had relaxed. "Oh, Ethan," she said, heading for the door. "That figures."

Her mother sighed. "What's he gone and done now, Russ?"

He laid a sheaf of papers on the kitchen table. "Have you heard about the girl found murdered by the kill last week?"

"Of course. It was on the news." Mindy's eyes widened. "Don't tell me you think my boy had something to do with that!"

"Calm down, Mindy. I'm not here to arrest him for murder. This is a warrant for a blood test. The murdered girl had a baby about a week before she was killed, and I have reason to suspect that Ethan may be the father."

Mindy sank into a chair. "Dear Lord," she said. "Who?"

"It was Katie McWhorter."

Mindy pressed her hands to her stomach. "Oh, no. Oh, no. That sweet girl." She shook her head back and forth. "As far as I know, Ethan broke up with Katie last year. If he was sneaking around and got her pregnant, he'll take responsibility for it." She rose slowly from her chair, glaring at Russ. "But you listen to me, Russ Van Alstyne. My boy didn't have anything to do with killing anybody."

"What's going on?" Wayne Stoner stood in the door. He shook Russ's hand firmly. "What's that boy gotten into now?"

"Russ wants to take Ethan for a blood test," Mindy said. "Seems Katie McWhorter had a baby a few weeks back, and Ethan might be responsible."

"Aw, no," Wayne said. "What a damn fool thing to do. You can practically buy condoms at the feedstore nowadays!"

Hannah had slipped in and was watching round-eyed from beside the woodstove. "Did Ethan get some girl pregnant?" she asked.

"There's more," Mindy said to her husband, ignoring her daughter. "Katie is the girl they found dead down by the kill."

Wayne squinted at Russ. "You think Ethan had something to do with that?"

Russ spread his hands. "Wayne, I don't know. First step is to get this blood test and see if he could be the baby's father. Then we'll take it from there." He turned to Hannah. "Did you tell Ethan I was here when you got your father?"

She nodded. "He said he'd be right down."

Russ looked up toward the barn. He wanted to get this over with. "I guess I'd better walk up there myself."

"I'll come with you," Mindy said, pulling on her jacket. Outside, they tramped up the gravel road. To the northwest the clouds were dark blue and heavy. Snow later tonight or tomorrow.

Mindy opened the gate to the barnyard. "Ethan!" she called. The road ended at the two-story-high entrance to the old barn.

"Maybe you ought to stay out here," Russ said.

"Don't be ridiculous. This is my son we're talking about." Inside, the barn was warm with animal heat. The cows on the left-hand stalls had all been hooked up to their milkers, while the ones on the right waited. Ethan was nowhere in sight. The back of Russ's neck felt hot. Something in the situation read wrong, very wrong.

"Ethan!"

At the opposite end of the barn the tank-room door bounced open. Ethan stood framed in the doorway, a big, scared young man with a shotgun pointed straight at Russ.

Russ shoved Mindy into a stall and dived in beside her. "Ethan!" she screamed. The cow sharing the space tried to turn her head around to see what was going on, but her bit chains held her to the feed trough. "Ethan, what are you doing?"

"Get out of here, Mom!"

"Ethan?" Russ said, projecting a calm he didn't feel into his voice. "Your mother is going to walk out of the barn. She'll be alone. Then you and I can talk."

"Both of you get out of here!"

"I'm not leaving," Mindy whispered.

"You get out and run to the house and call nine one one. Tell them what's happened. Then let me handle this."

"What are you doing?" Ethan shouted.

Russ raised his voice. "Ethan, your mom's coming out of the stall now." He hauled Mindy to the edge of the wooden wall. "Go!"

She stood shakily. "Ethan, please, don't do this."

"Get out, Mom. This doesn't have anything to do with you."

Mindy looked back at Russ.

"Go!" he hissed. "Go, go!"

Mindy stumbled back a few steps, moving to the doorway while facing her son. Then she turned and fled into the barnyard. She was scrambling up her porch steps two at a time when she heard the shot fired.

INSTINCT had sent Russ flat into the straw when Ethan's shotgun went off. A second later he was back up, crouching against the wall to keep the terrified Holstein from crushing him. Throughout the barn he could hear disturbed lowing and thuds.

"Ethan!" Russ called. "I'm willing to say that gun went off by accident. Right now you're facing resisting arrest and threatening a police officer. Don't make it attempted murder. Put the gun down."

"I know you came here to arrest me for Katie's murder. I didn't do it!" Ethan's voice sounded shaky and defiant.

"If you say you didn't do it, Ethan, I'll believe you. I came here to ask you to take a blood test to see if Katie's baby was yours."

"You lie! Everybody thinks I did it. I didn't! I could never hurt her. I loved her!"

"Then, if you loved her, help me find who did kill her."

"I can't! I was drinking alone in my car before I went to Videotek that night. Nobody saw me. I got no one to say I didn't do it."

Russ spread his hands against the cow's warm flank. Somewhere there was a magic combination of words that would get the kid to lay down his gun and walk out. All he had to do was find them. "Ethan, I'm not gonna tell you what to do. I am just going to give you the facts. Fact. You fired on a peace officer. Fact. Right now there are cops from the town and the state converging on your farm. Fact. You've got the power, right here and now, to stop this thing. Or you can choose to shoot it out with a state SWAT team. What do you think the outcome of that will be?"

The cows lowed. Chains rattled.

"This is Officer Durkee of the Millers Kill Police," a voice shouted from outside the barn.

"Mark, this is Russ! I'm okay!" Now. Now was the moment to take a chance. He eased his 9-mm Glock out of its holster. Keeping the weapon down by his side, he straightened to his full height, shoulders and head above the cow's broad back. In the fading light he could see Ethan's outline at the back of the barn. "Stay where you are, Mark," he shouted. "I think Ethan's going to put down his gun and come out. Aren't you, Ethan?"

The boy was a space of stillness in the dark. Hay rustled. A cow kicked against her stall with a loud thump. "Yeah," Ethan said.

Russ hadn't realized he was holding his breath until he let it out in a whoosh. "Okay. Put the gun on the floor, then put your hands on top of your head."

When Ethan walked past him, hands on head, Russ slipped from the stall and fell in behind him. He holstered his gun.

Mark Durkee was beside the barn door. He leveled his gun at Ethan. "Ethan Stoner, you're under arrest," he said. His glance flickered to Russ. "Chief?"

"I'm fine, Mark. Take Ethan to the car while I go talk to his parents, please." He let himself through the gate while Mark read the boy his rights. On the porch Wayne and Mindy stood with their arms wrapped around each other, straining to see the barnyard in the twilight. Russ felt flushed and shaky. He forced a smile to his face and began the long, long climb up the porch steps.

CLARE SMILED WHEN SHE SAW that the driveway to the police station had been thoroughly plowed. She eased her car into a parking space. She really was going to need another vehicle. Problem was, the only way she could afford a new car was to sell the old one. The thought of which sent her into a blue funk. This MG was the closest she had ever gotten to flying on the ground.

Inside the station Clare shucked off her jacket. "Harlene?" she said, approaching the dispatch room. "Has the chief left yet? I was hoping—" She shut up when she saw Harlene's face. "What is it?"

The dispatcher pushed her headset further back over her springy gray curls. "The chief went to bring Ethan Stoner in for his blood test, and the boy pulled a shotgun on him."

The rest of the room faded to a blur, and Harlene's face came into exquisite focus.

"What happened?" Clare's voice was even.

"I don't know. They were both in the barn. Mindy Stoner heard a gunshot, but I haven't had any news since then."

Clare nodded. "Harlene," she said, "I'd be grateful if you'd let me stay. I'd like to find out if—if anything has happened."

Harlene held her hand out toward an old office chair next to the filing cabinet. "You just sit right down. I'd be glad for the company." Clare tossed her coat under the chair and sat.

"Who's been sent out to help with the situation?"

"Three of our officers. The state troopers and their SWAT team." Harlene worried at the inside of her cheek. "And an ambulance."

"Oh, of course." Clare looked at her hands.

The phone rang. Harlene had it off the hook before the sound died away. "Millers Kill Police," she said. Her face crinkled up into a huge smile. "Oh, it's good to hear your voice."

"Is it him?" Clare whispered. "Is he okay?"

Harlene nodded. "No, he's absolutely right. You let them handle the arrest and the initial report. You go home!" Harlene glanced over at Clare. "Hold on. There's somebody who's been waiting to find out how you are." She nodded to the phone and held it out to Clare.

"Hello," she said, feeling unaccountably shy.

"Hi," Russ said.

"Remember when you warned me Millers Kill wasn't a sleepy little town? I believe you now."

He laughed. "Good."

"So it sounds like you're not going to come into the office."

He sighed. "I guess I should go home. Linda's out of town, and I'm still . . ." He drifted off.

"I know. Meet me for a drink somewhere. We can talk."

"Oh, God. I don't think I can handle going out right now."

"Then tell me where you'll be, and I'll come to you."

"Do you think . . . Would my place be okay? I could shower and change, rustle up some burgers or something. Would that be, um, unpriestly or anything?"

She laughed softly. "I think what would be unpriestly would be to let a friend sit at home all alone with no one to talk to. Give me directions and tell me when to be there."

After she had his address, she handed the phone back to Harlene, who said into it, "You gonna confess your sins to Reverend Fergusson? Make sure she has a few hours." She listened, snorted at something he said. "I hope you feel good about this, Chief. You just captured Katie's killer." There was a pause. "Well . . . bye, then. See you tomorrow." She hung up.

"What did he say?" Clare asked.

"Said he didn't know about that."

CHAPTER SIX

WHEN Russ opened the door, he looked over Clare's shoulder. "Where's your car?"

She grimaced. "I didn't want to risk getting stuck, so I left it at the base of the drive and walked up."

He moved aside so she could enter the mudroom. "In that leather

jacket and your oh-so-practical boots, too." She looked down at her soggy suede half boots. "Talk about unprepared for the weather."

"I remembered the important stuff," she said, holding up a six-pack of microbrew. She bent to remove her boots. "And I could have worn my warm parka. Unfortunately, it belongs to the police, and I'm afraid if you see it, you'll confiscate it." She handed him her jacket.

"Stolen property." He hung her jacket up on one of the many hooks running along the wall and opened the door to the kitchen.

Clare sat at the round oak table while Russ unhooked a bottle of beer from the cardboard container and retrieved a liter bottle of soda from the fridge. He poured their drinks, handed her the beer, and sat opposite her. She propped her chin in her hand and studied him. He had a fit, outdoors look to him, his dark brown hair picked out with gold and copper. He looked like a man who had lived comfortably within his skin for the past forty-odd years.

"So," she said.

"So," he agreed. His eyes were Fourth-of-July blue, high and bright with the snap of a flag in the wind. But behind them she could see something moving, like pages turning in a book no one was allowed to read.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

He took a sip of soda. "Fine. No one got hurt, and Ethan's in jail. I count it as a victory for the good guys."

"Have you called your wife yet to let her know?"

He shook his head emphatically. "No."

"Don't want to scare her?"

"No, it's my mother who gets scared." He smiled wryly. "I figured something might be on the news by tonight, so I called my sister Janet and asked her to talk to Mom."

"Uh-huh. And you didn't talk to Linda because . . ."

He frowned. She kept her face open, waiting. "Okay. Linda and I have been married sixteen years now. So she's been with me through a lot: armed deployments, police work, bullets flying. And I don't know if she started out like this or if she cultivated it, but she thinks I'm invulnerable. I can't go to her and say, 'I was fright-

ened out of my wits today,' because she won't understand. What I do is like an action-adventure movie to her. Nothing's quite real." He looked at Clare and smiled slightly. "Did I just do an elaborate version of 'my wife doesn't understand me'?"

She smiled. "Uh-huh." She leaned forward, crossing her arms on the table. "Are you an alcoholic?"

He choked on a mouthful of soda. "Damn! You don't beat around the bush, do you? Yes, I'm an alcoholic. I've been dry for five years now. What does that have to do with anything?"

"I'm just wondering, If you can't talk about it with your wife and you can't pour it into a bottle, where do you go?"

He leaned back in his chair. "I don't, I guess," he said finally. "But it's not like I'm a homicide detective in the city. I'm not having guns pointed at me on a regular basis."

"Tell me, what feels the worst about what happened today? Being scared you might die?"

"No. Only an idiot isn't scared when somebody pulls a gun on him. I'm not ashamed of it."

"Then is it the fact that you should have known that Ethan was on edge and ready to blow? That if you had handled the situation differently, he never would have picked up that shotgun?"

He swallowed. "Yeah. I do feel responsible. I kept thinking, What a waste it would be if Ethan didn't make it because I hadn't taken the time to find out the kids in his school already had him tried and convicted. Instead, I waltzed in there with not even a phone call so his parents could set him straight about what would happen. That's just careless."

"I knew about what the kids were saying at the high school. Heard about it on Monday night. I didn't do anything about it."

He scowled at her. "That's different."

She scowled back. "Why? Because it's not my job to do all I can to—to protect and to serve?"

He laughed quietly. "That's the LAPD, not Millers Kill."

"No, that's you." She took a drink of her beer. "The angel at the gate guarding your paradise from the evil of a fallen world."

"So you think I should—what? Stop caring so much?"

"No, not at all. But I think you should stop beating yourself up when you fall short of some imagined standard of perfection. Come talk to me next time instead. I'd be happy to point out the flaws in your image of yourself."

"As opposed to pointing out my actual flaws."

"I think I need to know you better before I start in on those."

He smiled at her. "Seems like you already know me a little too well for comfort."

She shook her head, smiling, dropping her gaze to the table. There was a muffled mechanical roar as the furnace kicked in. The thermostat must have been set high, because the kitchen was plenty warm already. A clock ticked in the next room.

"Well," she finally said, "now that we've solved all your problems, how about that burger I was promised?"

So Russ made burgers while he put Clare to work on a salad, although when she started rummaging through the pantry, pulling out cans of artichoke hearts and mandarin oranges, he looked as if he might have regretted not limiting her to setting the table. As they ate, he listened very patiently when she got carried away describing all her gadgets from Williams-Sonoma, only laughing once, when she told him about her latest acquisition, a shrimp deveiner.

Afterward, he washed and she dried. When the kitchen had been restored to its pristine state, she grabbed another bottle of beer and he gave her the grand tour of the house. They had just made themselves comfortable in the living room when the phone rang. "I gotta get this," Russ said as he vaulted out of his chair. "I'm expecting word on the blood test results." He glanced at his watch. "Jeez, it's almost ten o'clock! Where did the evening go?"

She rose and followed him into the kitchen. "I'll take that as a compliment on my ability to be a distraction."

"You are that," he said, picking up the receiver. "Hello?"

Clare went into the chilly mudroom to retrieve her boots and jacket. She looked glumly out the window. When had it started to snow? She carried her things back into the kitchen.

Russ was still holding the phone. "Okay," he said. "Okay. I'll be there." He hung up the phone, shaking his head.

"I was going to impose on you for a ride into town, since it's really coming down out there. But I can see it's a bad time."

He passed a hand over his face. "That was the night dispatch out of Glens Falls. A motorist called in a body beside the road. Durkee and Flynn went to check it out. Wallet was in the guy's pants." He looked at her. "It's Darrell McWhorter. He's been shot to death."

IF KATIE McWhorter had resembled a frozen storybook princess in death, her father looked like roadkill. Russ tried to summon some basic human sympathy for the corpse, but the only emotion he could come up with was irritation that Darrell had died before Russ had had a chance to dig any more information out of him.

He and Clare had been the last to arrive at the scene on the old Schuylerville Road. Durkee and Flynn had secured the area, and the state crime-scene unit was already in place. They were working as fast as they could, racing the snow that had already covered up tire tracks and footprints and turned Darrell into a blurred heap.

He had died from a single gunshot at the back of his head, delivered only inches away. He died with a half-smoked cigarette in his fingers; the butt was now in a plastic bag in the evidence box.

"Whaddya think happened?" Mark Durkee asked.

Russ glanced down the road, past his pickup, where Clare sat steaming at his orders not to leave the cab. "He was in a car," Russ said, re-creating the scene in his mind. "Not his car. The killer was driving. They're going someplace . . . not local. McWhorter wants a smoke. The killer says, 'No smoking in my car. But I'll pull off. You can have one there.' McWhorter gets out. The killer gets out. There aren't any cars going by. It's an opening, and the killer takes it. Bang. He does McWhorter, gets back in the car, and drives off."

"That's somebody very cool, who can put it all together fast."

"Yeah. Or somebody who has fantasized about killing McWhorter so often that when the opportunity arose, she was ready to snatch it."

"She?" Mark said.

"Sure. You think only men can kill?"

"Hell, no. I'm a married man."

Russ laughed. "As soon as you can, I want you to head over to Geoffrey and Karen Burnses' house and find out where they've been this evening. If they give you any problems, call me. We'll get a warrant tonight, if necessary."

"Will do, Chief."

"I'm going to pay a visit to McWhorter's daughter, Kristen. See if she finally agreed to meet with her dear old dad tonight."

"I'VE been thinking," Clare announced when Russ got into his truck. "I'm going to come with you when you talk with Kristen."

Russ shifted the truck into gear. "No, you're not. I said I'd drop you home. I didn't say anything about making you junior deputy. What makes you think I'm going to talk with Kristen, anyway?"

"She's a logical suspect, isn't she?"

"So are the Burnses." He cautiously pulled into the road. "As a matter of fact, they're the only ones I can think of who had reason to kill both Katie and her father."

Silence. He glanced over at Clare. She was frowning. "Was McWhorter killed and then dumped?" she asked abruptly.

"Nope. He got out of the car and was shot there on the side of the road." Flashing yellow lights up ahead; plows were out, trying to keep up with the relentless accumulation of snow.

"Why would he be with the Burnses? Where does this road go?"

"Toward Schuylerville and Saratoga and the Northway. As for why he'd be with them, I'd guess they were making a payoff."

Clare shook her head. "No. Even if they were going to exchange money for the baby, why would they be heading out of town?"

He tried to come up with a reason that made sense. The frustrating feeling that this case was getting more complicated rather than less was creeping up like a fog around his head.

"The Northway—that's how you get to Albany, right?"

"Yeah." He nodded, his head working slowly. "McWhorter and

whoever killed him could have been headed for Albany to get something from the house Katie lived in."

"You haven't been there yet, have you?"

"No. The Albany PD is supposed to cover that." His numb brain finally sparked the right connections. "Damn!" he said, snatching at the radio. "Dispatch, this is Chief Van Alstyne of the Millers Kill PD. Can you connect me direct to cruiser Fifty-seven fifteen?"

There was a blare of static and then Kevin Flynn's voice from the speaker. "Fifty-seven fifteen. Go ahead."

"Kevin? This is the chief. Cancel the Burnses. I want you and Mark to go to the station, get the Katie McWhorter file, and find the address of her student digs in Albany. Then get on the horn to Albany and have them send someone there immediately. I think whoever killed McWhorter may be headed for that house."

"Ten four, Chief. Fifty-seven fifteen out."

Clare looked out the window at the snow-blotched roadway. "You think they might catch the killer?"

"Maybe. McWhorter wasn't killed much more than three hours ago. If the snow slowed his killer down enough, maybe the Albany PD will walk in on him."

"What are you going to do now?"

"Now? I'm going to drop you off at the rectory. What do you think, you've got a free pass to tag along every step of the way?"

Evidently, she did. She was still there when he cruised past the Burnses', noting the lit windows and the two vehicles in the driveway. "That doesn't mean they're not involved," he said to her smug smile. He put another call through to the station, asking Durkee and Flynn to head over to question the Burnses after they had gotten hold of the Albany police.

Clare's smile disappeared when they drove up to the tiny rental park where Kristen McWhorter lived. "What's she drive?" Russ asked as they cruised slowly along a row of town houses.

"An '89 Honda Civic," she said, trying to spot Kristen's car somewhere in the parking lot. "Black."

"I don't see it."

They parked in the first available space and waited. After a while headlights gleamed at the entrance to the parking lot. A small car crept in, tires churning against the snow. The black Honda Civic pulled in a few spaces away from the pickup. Its interior light flashed weakly as someone opened and shut the door. Russ could barely make out the figure struggling up the sidewalk through the screen of heavy snow. He and Clare both opened their doors.

"Kristen?" he called.

She whirled, bringing her fist up. Her keys stuck up between her fingers like stubby claws. She held a bulky knapsack to her chest.

Russ raised his hands. "It's me, Chief Van Alstyne. Reverend Fergusson is with me."

"What? What's going on? Is it Katie's baby?"

"We need to talk to you. May we come in?"

Under her black knit cap, Kristen looked at them suspiciously. "Okay." She waded through the snow and unlocked the townhouse door. Inside, they tried to wrestle off jackets and boots without spreading snow onto the carpet.

"What are you doing out here so late?" Kristen asked, dropping the knapsack. "Is there news on Katie's case?"

Clare looked at him as if to say, Okay, how do you do this?

Damned if he knew. Your father's had his brains blown out tonight. And by the way, did you do it? "Where've you been for the last few hours, Kristen?" he asked.

"I went out for some pizza with my friends tonight after class. I'm studying for my CPA."

Clare stepped close and laid a hand on the girl's arm. "Kristen, your father was found dead tonight. He's been murdered."

Kristen gaped. "He's *dead?*" she asked in a shrill voice. Then she burst into tears.

RUSS felt like he was in a rerun of a bad television show: Kristen sobbing and bleeding out her makeup, Clare holding the girl's hand.

Kristen wailed. "Now I'll never get a chance to tell him what I

thought of him!" She sucked air in great noisy gulps. "Now I'll never know about Katie!"

"If your father killed her, Kristen, he's already paid for it. And if he didn't, we'll find who did. I promise you," Russ said.

"Kristen," Clare said, "do you know who your father was meeting tonight? Do you have any idea who might have killed him?"

Kristen shook her head. "I told you I haven't spoken to him since I left home. I was working up the nerve to call him and Mom about Katie's funeral." She jerked her head up, blinking swollen eyes at Clare. "Oh, God, now I'm going to have to make arrangements for him, too! Mom won't be able to handle it."

"I can help you," Clare said. "I can help."

Russ mumbled his excuses and went into the kitchen to look for a telephone. He dialed the station first, and when the message to dial 911 clicked on, he hung up and called the Glens Falls dispatcher. She had the number of the detective in Albany who had been sent out to Katie's former home.

Two rings, and a brisk feminine voice answered, "Ramirez."

"Detective, this is Chief Van Alstyne, from Millers Kill. I understand you're assisting with a murder we've had up here."

"Chief Van Alstyne. Yeah. We got a unit to the victim's house right after we got your message, but your man had already gone."

Russ slapped the receiver against his thigh. He jerked it back up to his ear in time to hear Ramirez say, ". . . identified himself to the girl as your decedent's father."

"There's a witness?"

"For what it's worth. We've got her downtown with an artist right now, but I wouldn't hold your breath. She's eighteen, and she'd had a few beers earlier in the evening. The description we have is average height, average weight, no identifying features except for a bushy mustache, which may be fake."

"So what did the perp do at the house?"

"According to the witness, there had been a call earlier from someone identifying himself as the murder victim's father. Said he was coming to get some of the girl's things. This guy shows up

around nine thirty, goes to her room, and comes back out ten or fifteen minutes later with a backpack. We're hoping for prints, of course. Give me your fax number, and I'll have the complete report and the artist's sketch to you by morning."

Russ looked at his watch. It was after twelve. He was going to have to switch shifts with Lyle MacAuley. No way he could be working this case and still be alert enough to pull Friday night patrol tomorrow. He told Detective Ramirez the station's fax number, thanked her, and hung up.

In the living room, Kristen was sitting quietly. Clare, in a bamboo chair next to her, looked up as he walked in.

He shrugged. "Someone showed up at Katie's house tonight claiming to be her father. He took something out of her room in a knapsack. One of her housemates was there. She's talking to a police artist right now, trying to give us a description."

Clare glanced at Kristen. "Any chance it was Darrell?" she asked.

Russ paused. "Doesn't sound it. Supposedly a man with a mustache. It might have been a disguise."

Clare looked skeptical. "Who the heck could it be?"

"Kristen," Russ said, "was there anyone else your sister might have been seeing?"

"I told you," she said, her voice raw and tired. "If she was seeing someone else, she never let on to me."

He glanced over to Clare. "Maybe Katie was into drugs, and we're on the wrong track. Maybe she got on the wrong side of some bad people."

Clare opened her mouth to respond, but she was cut off by Kristen. "My sister didn't do drugs or kiddie porn or anything else! She was a good person. If you weren't such a small-town cop, you might have caught the man who did this by now!"

"Kristen!" Clare jumped to her feet. "That's not fair."

Kristen jerked her head around to face the priest. "What do you know about it! My sister is dead! And the best this guy can do is come here and ask me if I know any reason why she might deserve it? Oh, and by the way, did you kill your father tonight?"

"That's enough, Kristen." Clare's voice cut through the air like a helicopter blade. "You're exhausted and upset." She moved to the door, pulling her coat off the rack and finding her boots. "You call me tomorrow if you want any help with the arrangements."

She waved a hand at Russ, who was still standing, stocking-footed, in the doorway. He switched into motion, getting his coat and boots while Clare continued. "I want you to get yourself something hot to drink and go straight to bed. You have my number." Kristen nodded. "I'm sorry, Kristen. About everything." Clare opened the door and jerked her head at Russ. "Time to go."

She shut the town-house door and hunched her shoulders against the pelting snow. She was inside the truck, brushing off her jacket, by the time he climbed up into the cab. He fired up the engine and sat for a moment, too wiped out to begin the long, slow ride back home. Back to the rectory, that was. Had to take Clare home first.

He reversed out of the parking space, his four-wheel drive chugging against the accumulated snow, then concentrated on the road, turning the defroster on full to clear the steam from his windshield.

Because of its roar, he missed the first two or three muffled gulps from the other side of the cab. He risked taking his eyes off the road for a moment. Clare was twisted, so he couldn't see her face. He heard her again, the sound of something noisy being swallowed.

"Clare? Are you okay?" He saw the bank of yellow lights ahead and coasted to a slow stop well before the oddly angled intersection of Route 39 and Tanco Road. "Clare," he said, turning toward her, "if you're okay, will you please look at me?"

The back of her head jerked back and forth.

"Clare?" He thought back to how he felt earlier this evening, the weight and tension dropping off him as he sat across from her at the kitchen table, talking. "Clare, who do you talk to? You asked me that, remember? Who do you talk to, Clare?"

Her voice was thick and tight. "I'll be all right." The lights turned green. He didn't move. "It's just— She makes me think of my sister," she finally got out.

"Your sister," he said. "What about your sister?"

She turned to him, her face drawn and pinched. "She died five years ago this Thanksgiving."

In the mirror he could see distant lights headed up Route 39. He shifted the truck into gear and carefully drove on through the icy intersection. "Tell me," he said, "what was her name?"

"Grace. She was . . ." She coughed. "She was like a beautiful decoration on a Christmas tree. Funny and loving and frivolous. She was the sweet little sister, and I was the tomboy know-it-all big sister. She was the beautiful one, and I was the smart one."

"She sounds like a very special person," he said quietly.

"She was to us," Clare said. "She never did anything that would make you stand up and take notice. She worked for our parents' aviation company, secretarial work and bookkeeping. Mostly she wanted to get married and have lots of kids. She would have, too. She had guys left, right, and center."

Russ didn't want to hear more. He hated the dread creeping along the edges of his nerves, knowing how the story ended. He ached for Clare, who had dried her eyes and was speaking in a low voice.

"She was four years younger than me. Twenty-five when she—when it happened. She had had this pain on and off in her abdomen. It finally got bad enough for her to have it checked out." She closed her eyes. "It was colorectal cancer, well advanced. She didn't suspect. She went in for a checkup in the morning, and by that evening she was under a death sentence."

He made the left-hand turn onto Main Street. The shop lights were almost invisible in the snowy haze.

"I was stationed at Fort Bragg at the time, about four hours from home. Grace moved back into our parents' house, and I visited them every weekend." She folded her hands and pressed them to her mouth. "After four months she was in agony. She was half dead from chemo, and the half of her that was alive was suffering every day, all day." She rested her chin on her tightly clasped hands. "There was an intern she had dated, a friend of hers. Harry. He came for Thanksgiving dinner. I wasn't there; I was on duty. While

the rest of them were in the kitchen, Harry went into Grace's room and gave her fifty crushed Valium pills suspended in a solution of cranberry juice and vodka. She died within a half hour."

His heart hurt for her. "Oh, Clare, I'm so sorry."

"I never got to say good-bye to her." She shook her head sharply. "I'm sorry. I never talk about this. I don't know what got into me."

He turned onto Church Street. "It's late and you're tired," he said. "With all this stuff about Kristen and her sister, you needed to talk about Grace and you needed a friend. I like to think I qualify."

She smiled a little at him. "You surely do. Thanks."

He drove past St. Alban's, onto Elm Street. Over her protests about not trying to make it into her driveway, he shifted into second and churned a path up to her kitchen door.

The truck idled quietly. "The guys on the graveyard shift always swing by my place around dawn," he said. "Give me your key. I'll radio them tonight, ask if one of them will drive your car back into town if the roads are plowed by then." She nodded, fishing a key chain out of her pocket. "You need me to come in?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I started out this evening hoping I could help you get it all off your chest," she said. "Didn't expect to be on the receiving end."

He draped his arm over the back of the seat. "Will I embarrass you if I tell you I admire you? The way you listen to people, the way you want to help?"

She smiled. "Yes, you will. But thanks. For everything." She looked at him seriously. "For letting me be just Clare, instead of the Reverend Fergusson. It's a rare thing to have someone you can just be yourself with, you know."

He was going to make a crack about hanging out with heathens more, but he couldn't, not with her looking at him that way. He shifted his gaze to the dashboard. "Good night, Clare."

"Good night, Russ." She slipped from the cab.

He waited until he had seen her inside before he shifted the truck into gear, pulled out, and drove away from the rectory at a much faster speed than was safe.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CLARE paused in front of the parish bulletin board, a packing box of Christmas banners propped against one hip. Still woolly-headed from the late night and high emotion, she had tackled the mindless task of digging the church's Christmas decorations out of the undercroft this morning. A picture of Karen and Geoffrey Burns caught her eye. They looked so happy and relaxed in the photo.

For all of their raging and desperation, Clare still couldn't believe that the Burnses' desire for a child could lead them into murder. She had seen them with that baby in the hospital, seen the tenderness that was ordinarily lost in the brassy blare of their personalities.

"Reverend Clare?" Lois's voice broke her concentration.

She hoisted the box higher and walked into the secretary's office.

"A couple of messages for you," Lois said. "Karen Burns called, and Kristen McWhorter."

"Thanks." Clare dropped the box against the wall and took the paper slips. In her office, she flung herself into her chair and looked out the window, longing for a four-hour nap. Instead, she picked up the phone and dialed.

"Kristen? It's Clare Fergusson. You left a message for me?"

"Yeah. I was hoping— I have to go see my mom today. I was wondering, Would you come with me? I know it's asking a lot."

"No, I'd be more than happy to come if I can be helpful. I'm glad you thought to call me."

There was a pause. "About last night? I'm sorry I got all weird on you. I was just— It was all too much, you know?"

"Believe me, I understand. Give me the directions to your mother's apartment, and I'll meet you there." She scribbled the address on a piece of paper. "Okay. See you in about half an hour."

SOMEONE HAD HUNG A PAIR of plastic wreaths on the front doors of 162 South Street, where Mrs. McWhorter buzzed Clare and Kristen up without comment. The stairs were steep and poorly lit, and Clare wondered if this place could pass a municipal safety inspection. Did Millers Kill have safety inspectors?

The door to 4A swung open at Kristen's knock.

"Hello, Ma," she said. Clare tried to school her shock at the size of the woman who embraced the ramrod-stiff girl.

Brenda McWhorter pulled away, her expression hurt. "Aw, Kristen, don't be like that." Her eyes flickered to where Clare stood in the hall. "Don't tell me you've brought a cop with you."

"She's not a cop, Ma. She's a priest. She's the one who was there the night they found Katie. She's been helping me out. This is Reverend Clare Fergusson."

Brenda McWhorter shook hands and led Kristen and Clare into the apartment. "Well, go ahead, take your coats off," she said, gesturing toward a row of hooks by the door. "Same place. Nothin's changed since you left."

Kristen rolled her eyes but obediently gathered up Clare's jacket and hung it alongside her own coat. She plunked herself into the narrow settee and crossed her arms. "What are you gonna do now that he's gone, Ma? Move back out to Aunt Pat's? Get a job?"

Her mother sat, an operation that required her to lower her center of gravity over a well-used, well-sprung chair and then drop in a controlled fall. "Well, honey, I thought I'd stay here. I got enough money to keep me."

Clare sat, her face composed and pleasant, wondering how another human being could let herself get that large. She shifted in her chair. Dear God, she thought, help me to accept as Christ accepted. Keep my mind on helping, not judging.

Kristen was going over her mother's financial situation, asking to look over the insurance documents, quizzing her on other benefits. Mrs. McWhorter was at best vague about money matters.

Clare turned to Kristen. "Are you going to ask your mother about what she'd like for the funerals?"

"Aw, Krissie," Brenda McWhorter said, "you're gonna take care of the details, aren't you? I'm no good at that sort of thing."

"Yeah, Ma, I'm gonna take care of the details. I know you're no good at that sort of thing." Kristen's voice began to crack. "You don't like to deal with life's crappy little details."

"Krissie . . ."

"Ma, I'm the kid here, remember? You're the mom. You were supposed to take care of me and Katie, not the other way around, and I gotta tell you, you did a piss-poor job of it."

"Krissie . . ." Brenda's hands fluttered ineffectually. Clare suddenly saw, very clearly, the small woman inside that bulky disguise. "I tried . . . you don't understand. You never understood what it was like to need someone." She looked beseechingly toward Clare. "In a lot of ways he was a real good husband and father."

Clare clenched her teeth tightly to keep her gorge down.

Brenda dropped her gaze to the carpet and shook her head. "I couldn't lose him, Krissie. You gotta learn to overlook some things when you're married. He took good care of me, and he loved me." She started to cry. "I don't know what I'll do without him. Damn him for thinking he could make one last big deal."

Clare looked up. What?

Kristen shook her head. "Jeez, him and his big deals . . ."

"Kristen, if your father was killed while involved in one last big deal, whoever he was dealing with may have been his killer. It may have been Katie's killer."

Kristen and Clare both looked at Brenda. "No," she said. "I don't wanna borrow trouble, Krissie, and neither do you." She darted a glance at Clare. "I already said my piece to the cops. I don't got anything else to say."

"Ma"—Kristen's eyes narrowed—"if you know something and don't tell me, I'm heading out this door, and you can bury Dad in a shoe box by yourself for all the help you'll get from me."

The woman shifted, her face a mask of misery. Finally she sighed. "Darrell said he knew who the baby's father was. Said he had surprised Katie and him together last winter, in a car. He said

he could get money from the guy. He called him that last afternoon."

"Darrell called someone?" asked Clare.

"Oh, my God, Ma, do you know his name?"

Brenda's face quivered. "He didn't tell me none of the details, honey. You know I'm not good—"

"Not good with details. Yeah, I know."

"Mrs. McWhorter, when Darrell told you that he was going to get in touch with this man, did either of you consider that you were going to be making a deal with the man who probably killed your daughter?" Clare knew she was speaking too sharply, but Brenda's monstrous self-absorption was sucking the patience out of her.

"Well . . ." Brenda looked uncertainly at Clare. "You know, there wasn't nothin' gonna bring Katie back, was there? And maybe Darrell would have turned him in after he'd gotten what he wanted." She opened her hands. "I didn't really think about it."

RUSS was dropping piles of papers on the big scarred-oak table in the briefing room when Mark Durkee strolled in, fifteen minutes early for the evening shift. "Hey, Chief. How y'doing?"

"This case is giving me a headache," Russ informed him, slapping down a manila folder.

Lyle MacAuley stopped in the doorway, already changed into his civvies. He leaned over the table, his eyebrows rising in interest. "Whatcha got here, Chief?"

"I'm drowning in reports on the McWhorter case." Russ slid a broken stick of chalk across the table. "Get up to the board there, Lyle. Help me time line this thing out."

Lyle moved to the blackboard on the wall while Russ opened the medical examiner's report on Katie McWhorter. "Friday, December third." Lyle chalked the date in the upper left-hand corner. "Sometime between seven and nine o'clock, the killer— No, wait, better make that killer A bashes Katie's head in and drives off." Underneath the time, Lyle added, "A—Katie McW."

"A could be one or both of the Burnses. They have no alibi other

than each other for Friday night. It could have been Darrell McWhorter."

"Those names McWhorter gave you checked out, though," Lyle reminded him. "Dave Jackson and his wife were with the McWhorters from seven to eleven that night."

"Yeah, okay. Erase McWhorter. Ethan Stoner could have done it, too. He was mighty riled up that night when I saw him."

Lyle wrote down the name.

"Ethan's blood type checks out as the possible father of Katie's baby. But we showed Katie's picture to the local motel owners and found that the guy who runs the Sleeping Hollow Motor Inn saw her with some man who wasn't Ethan Stoner right around Thanksgiving. We ran a match on the '86 Nova they were driving. Turns out it's one of Katie's roommate's cars, and the license the guy showed the clerk was fake."

"So Ethan's not the father?" Mark asked.

"I don't like Ethan as the father," Russ said. "It doesn't fit with what we know about Katie. She doesn't strike me as a girl who'd have jumped in the sack with her old boyfriend on a whim."

"Doesn't mean Ethan couldn't have killed her when he found out about the baby," Lyle said. "And let's face it, we've seen he's capable of picking up a gun and threatening to kill someone."

"I know. That's why I haven't discounted him." Russ flipped open the medical examiner's report on Darrell McWhorter. "Let's take a look at the next one. Darrell McWhorter meets with the Burnses on the morning of December eight." Lyle noted the date. "He tells them he and his wife are keeping the baby. Sometime between eight and ten that night, he's shot to death, probably while on his way down to Albany. Some man shows up at Katie's house around nine thirty, says he's her father, and ransacks her room."

"It couldn't have been Ethan Stoner, because he was sitting in the county jail in Glens Falls at the time," Mark reminded him.

"How 'bout the Burnses?" Russ said. "Again, no alibi except each other. Reverend Fergusson and I drove past their place at eleven thirty that night, and both cars were in the drive."

"It only takes an hour to get to Albany," Lyle said. "An hour and a half in bad weather."

"So it'd be tight, but possible."

"Maybe they have a winter rat," Mark said.

Russ nodded thoughtfully. It was a common practice for people to protect their good cars from the ravages of winter by garaging them between December and March and driving a winter rat instead—any old heap with a heater and a defroster.

"If they do," Mark went on, "one of them could have taken it out while the other one stayed home, parking the cars in the drive and turning on the lights."

"Okay," Russ said. "Find out how many vehicles are registered to Mr. and Mrs. Burns. Don't forget to check any that might be under her maiden name or registered to their law practice."

"If it was Geoff Burns who tossed the student apartment in Albany," Lyle said, "what was he after?"

"Maybe there was something there that would tie him to Katie's murder," Russ said. "A letter or something."

Lyle looked at Mark. "Did you ask 'em about owning any firearms when you spoke with 'em last night?"

"She's got a 9-millimeter Smith and Wesson registered in her name. Said she keeps it in the trunk of her car for when she's traveling long distances alone."

Russ nodded. "We're gonna need a warrant to be able to test that weapon, sure enough."

Lyle crossed his arms over his flannel shirt and looked at the chalkboard. "You think you got enough to convince Judge Ryswick to let you take a look at that gun?"

Russ sighed. "Dunno. Tell you what, Mark. You do the rundown on the Burnses' registration, and I'll cover your patrol time until you're done. I'll just drive the squad car home afterward if I'm not near the station."

"You don't have to be home?"

"Nope. I'm batching it until Linda gets back on Saturday."

"You got a deal."

THE STREETS HAD BEEN plowed early in the morning, so it was a pleasure to drive without having to pay too much attention to the condition of the road. Russ headed south, where the scenery opened up into long valleys between easy, rolling hills. To the west and to the north the piedmont rose in wave after rounded wave.

He loved this part of the world more than any other. With the dark hills looming and the lights few and far between, it was easy to imagine what it had been like nearly three hundred years ago.

"Ten fifty to Ten fifty-seven, over." The crackle of the radio brought him back to his squad car.

"Ten fifty-seven, go," he said.

"Mark's all done, Chief," Harlene said, "and he says to tell you he hit the jackpot. There is another car."

"Yes!" He pumped the radio receiver in triumph. "I'll sign off and take this unit back to my house if he's ready to roll."

"Okay, I'll log you off-duty. You had a phone call a while back. Reverend Fergusson. Said she wanted to talk with you about the McWhorter case."

"Okay, thanks, Harlene. I'll see you tomorrow." He realized a second after he clicked the unit off that he didn't have Clare's number. He thought about calling Harlene back and getting it, but it was only fifteen, twenty minutes into town. He'd feel better if he could check up on her, make sure she was doing okay after everything that had happened last night.

St. Alban's was dark when he turned past it from Church Street onto Elm. For a moment he thought the rectory was dark, too, until he saw the lights shining out the back of the house. Of course, it was seven o'clock. She was probably making dinner. He parked behind her car and trudged along the beaten-down snow.

The kitchen door was as uncurtained as the rest of the house, and Russ could see the rector of St. Alban's sipping red wine and cooking up a storm. She was wearing jeans and a University of Virginia sweatshirt. Russ knocked loudly on the door.

She spun at the sound. She didn't screech, but she clapped a hand dramatically to her chest as she reached for the door. "Holy cow, you

nearly gave me a heart attack," she said, standing in the doorway.

"Sorry." Coming over in person suddenly seemed intrusive. "I'm sorry. I should have just called."

"I tried to reach you at the station," she said, crossing her arms against the cold. "Good Lord, it's freezing out here. Please, come in."

He paused. "Just for a minute." He stomped snow off on the top step. Inside the door a coat tree tilted precariously, weighed down by the Millers Kill police-issue parka she still hadn't returned.

She shut the door behind him. "Please, take your things off." Russ shucked off his parka and hung it on the opposite side of the tree. He could hear her take a deep breath. "I wanted to apologize for last night," she said. "I never break down like that. It was inappropriate, and I'm sorry."

"Never? You never break down and cry?"

A flush rose in her cheeks. "Okay, almost never. Certainly not with someone I haven't known for very long."

He sat in one of the four wooden chairs clustered around the kitchen table. "Funny. It doesn't feel as if we haven't known each other for very long. Does it?"

She blinked. "Honestly? No, it doesn't."

He spread his hands. "Remember what you asked me last night? Who do you go to when you feel this way?"

She smiled faintly, then laughed. "Okay, okay. You're right. I guess I don't need to apologize for dumping on you."

"I bet you'd call it venting if somebody did it to you."

"Hmmmm." She turned to the stove to transfer sautéed mushrooms from an iron skillet to the saucepan. She turned back to him. "Hungry? Why don't you stay for supper?"

"Oh, no. I couldn't," he said as unconvincingly as possible.

She opened the refrigerator door, retrieved a wedge of cheese, and plunked it on a cutting board in front of him. "You can grate the Parmesan," she said. She rummaged in one of the drawers a moment before handing him a grater, then retrieved her wineglass. She leaned against the counter. "I went with Kristen McWhorter today to her parents' apartment. Brenda McWhorter told me that

between the time I saw him at St. Alban's and the time he showed up dead, Darrell McWhorter got in touch with the man he said was Cody's father. Evidently, he had seen the two of them together sometime before Katie left for college and thought he could get money out of the guy by threatening to reveal his identity."

"What? He made a call to Cody's father?"

"Brenda hadn't even been bothered that Darrell was going to cut a deal with the man who might very well be her daughter's killer."

Russ shook the last few flakes of Parmesan free and laid the grater on the board. "That's assuming we're dealing with one person. That Katie's lover was also her killer. And Darrell's."

Clare sipped her wine. "It certainly indicates they were one and the same." She took the cutting board to the counter and pointed to one of the cupboards. "Plates are in there."

Dinner was a lamb stew, thick with winter vegetables and garnished with Parmesan. Russ went through half a loaf of bread sopping up the sauce. "Where'd you learn to cook like this?" he asked between mouthfuls.

"My grandmother Fergusson. We went to live with her when I was seven. I was a handful. One day she caught me dropping eggs off the veranda. She marched me into the kitchen and tied about an acre of apron around me and said, 'I'm going to teach you to put those eggs to better use, missy.' "

He grinned. "Do you miss your family?"

"Sometimes. My decision to enter the priesthood, coming on the heels of Grace's death, was hard for them. It wasn't what they had wanted for me."

"You can't blame them. All parents want their kids to have the same things they had. Marriage and a family. I know my mom regrets that Linda and I never had any children."

She leaned back in her chair. "Marriage and a family?"

"You know, giving that up to be a priest."

She covered her smile with her hand. "I think you're under some misapprehension here. Episcopalian priests don't take a vow of chastity. We can get married, have kids, the whole nine yards."

"What?" He stared at her. "But the old priest, he never—"

"Some priests choose to remain celibate. But it's just that—a choice, not an obligation."

"Huh. If that don't beat all." He felt unsettled and annoyed, as if she had deliberately kept the truth from him. "You'd think they'd just call you ministers, then, instead of all this priest business and the white collar and all."

She pushed her chair back and headed for the living room, then reemerged a minute later to hand him a large paperback.

"The History and Customs of the Episcopal Church in America," he read. "Sounds like a real page-turner."

"It is. Now finish that stew up, and you can have dessert."

He declined dessert on behalf of his waistband, which had a tendency to shrink in the wash when he ate too much, and she turned down his offer to help wash the pots and pans, but she did let him load the dishwasher.

"Would you like some coffee?"

"No. I'd better get going. It's late." He climbed back into his parka. "Thanks for the dinner."

"It was my pleasure. Company makes the meal, Grandmother Fergusson used to say."

He stuck out his hand just as she wrapped her arms around herself. Then he shoved his hands into his pockets just as she reached out to shake. Finally, he slapped his hand around hers and pumped like he was at a Rotary Club meeting. "Night, now," he said.

The squad car was freezing. He cursed the heater, cursed the weather, cursed the drive back to a dark and empty house. He wanted Linda home. Only two more days. Then he'd feel better.

CLARE flexed her chilly fingers together and glanced at the papers on the table, listening to the hiss of the radiators. She seemed to be the only one at vestry meetings who noticed that the meeting room—the entire parish hall—never warmed up. When the meeting adjourned, she headed for the coffee machine, poured herself a cup, and carried it back to the parish office, where she stopped off

for her messages. Lois tore off a pink memo slip and handed it to her.

Clare glanced at Lois's Parker-penmanship writing. "The Department of Human Services? For me? How did"—she looked at the memo again—"Ms. Dunkling sound?"

"Ms. Dunkling sounded just a tad put out."

"Guess the letter-writing campaign is having some effect."

Lois raised her eyebrows. "Uh-huh."

"No sense putting it off. Better beard the lion—lioness—in her den." Clare walked to her office, sat down at her desk, and reached for the phone. Waiting for Ms. Dunkling to come on the line, she flipped through her calendar. Infirmary visits. Stewardship committee. "Ms. Dunkling? This is Clare Fergusson of St. Alban's."

"Yes, Ms. Fergusson. I called you about these letters I've been getting from your membership." The voice on the other end of the line sounded nasal and inflectionless. "DHS is not an organization you can lobby, Ms. Fergusson. We have a legislative mandate to answer only to the best interests of the families we serve. Taking time out to read and answer a bunch of letters only results in less time for our vital mission to protect the children of New York."

Clare frowned. "Why not simply file the letters in with the other information you have, then? Why are you answering them?"

"Your people are getting their state legislators to send us letters, too. I don't need some house rep breathing down my neck. The child can't be cleared for adoption until we've made a final determination vis-à-vis his father or living relatives."

"So meanwhile, Cody spends his first formative year in a foster home instead of with his future parents?"

"Ms. Fergusson, he's in a perfectly good home with a caring, experienced foster mom. I'll give you her number, and you can check her out yourself." There was a pause, the faint sound of a Filofax flipping. "Deborah McDonald. 555-9385." Ms. Dunkling sighed exasperatedly. "Call off your hounds, Ms. Fergusson. If you want to help the Burnses, tell them to work with the system instead of trying to manipulate it. And tell them to stop making unauthorized visits to Mrs. McDonald. They know the rules."

"They've been stopping by to see Cody? That's a problem?"

"Yeah, it is a problem. As prospective adoptive parents, they shouldn't be seeing the child without DHS supervision. Call Mrs. McDonald. She'll tell you. Wednesday, Geoff Burns showed up without so much as a phone call at eight o'clock at night."

Clare rested a hand on her open calendar. "This past Wednesday? The eighth?" The night Darrell McWhorter was killed.

"Yeah. Why?"

"No reason. Yes, I'll talk with them about that."

Clare rang off quickly. Eight o'clock. Russ said they had told his officers they had been home all night. Maybe Geoff Burns had stopped by Mrs. McDonald's on his way home and hadn't thought to mention it. Maybe he had driven straight home and spent the rest of the night watching TV with his wife. Maybe he had a passenger in his car when he visited Cody. Maybe he killed Darrell McWhorter, drove to Albany, rifled Katie's room, and returned to Millers Kill with no one the wiser.

Dear Lord. Clare closed her eyes. Please, please don't let me have been wrong about them.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CLARE grimaced at the back of the eighteen-wheeler spraying dirty slush over her windshield. Russ was right: She was going to have to get another car. She could almost hear the salt eating away at the undercarriage. She glanced down at the directions Deborah McDonald had given her and gripped her steering wheel tightly.

The McDonalds' vinyl-sided garrison looked as if it had been plucked from some densely populated suburb and capriciously planted on a windy hillside surrounded by pasturage. Its only neighbor was a dairy farm a half mile down the twisting road.

The woman who opened the door to Clare's knock was like her

home: a disconcerting blend of bare-bones plainness and cozy domesticity. Deborah McDonald smiled widely and took both Clare's hands in her own.

"You must be the minister. I'm so glad to meet you. Come in. Come in!" Her kitchen was country cute and immaculate. "I was saying to Keith—that's my husband—that of all the babies I took in, there never was one left on the church steps. Take off your coat! Can I offer you some coffee?"

"Please. I appreciate you seeing me, Mrs. McDonald."

"Deborah, call me Deborah." She tilted her head toward a bulletin board covered with photographs of infants, children, teens, and young adults. "After all the kids I've had, 'Mom' seems more natural than my own name."

Clare examined the faces on the wall. "Looks like quite a crew. They must have kept you busy."

Deborah laughed. "Still do. I make it my business to knit something for each one for Christmas. I'm doing up a hat for Cody."

"Is he asleep?"

"Lord, yes. You'd be able to hear him if he wasn't. He's a noisy boy, that one, always wanting to talk." Deborah led Clare through a carpeted hallway into a white-walled nursery, where Cody sprawled in the middle of a crib in his blue sleeper.

"Gosh. He's gotten bigger. I can't believe it's only been ten days since I saw him last." Clare reached inside the crib. "May I?"

"Go ahead. Until he's hungry, nothing's going to wake him up."

Clare settled her hand over Cody's head and blessed him with a surge of tenderness and amazement that the most helpless of creatures were caught and held by God. Deborah nudged her arm and pointed to a needlepoint hanging near the window. HE KEEPS HIS EYE ON THE SPARROW, it read. "Yes," Clare said. "Yes, He does."

In the living room, they sat down, and she got to the point. "I understand the Burnses have been visiting Cody. Is it true Mr. Burns was here this past Wednesday evening?"

"Ayuh. Though that's not the only time it's happened. Mrs. Burns

showed up at the pediatrician's office when I took Cody in for his checkup. And they came round unsupervised a day or two after I got him, although they did call first."

"Did Mr. Burns call before he stopped by that night?"

Deborah crossed her legs. "No, he didn't. And to tell you the truth, he made me nervous. I won't say he was drunk, but he smelled like he had definitely had a few. I figured he must have left his office, gone out for a beer, and then hit on the bright idea to visit Cody. He was still in his coat and tie. Really, I don't like to complain. But I can't have folks showing up here at eight o'clock at night and disturbing the baby's routine."

Clare took a drink of coffee. "Deborah," she said, "how long does it take to get to the Old Schuylerville Road from here?"

"Hmmm? Are you heading that way next? You can reach it in about ten minutes."

"Ten minutes." Long enough to get to the spot where Darrell McWhorter's body had been dumped, take off for Albany, and still be home in time to meet the Millers Kill police at his front door. Clare had a sudden urge to drive to the Burnses' office right that minute. She wanted the truth.

She put her coffee on a needlepoint coaster and got up. "Deborah, thank you so much for having me over to take a look at Cody."

Deborah McDonald stood. "Not at all. I'm glad of the company."

The two women walked to the kitchen. "I promise you I'll talk to the Burnses and mention your concerns," Clare said.

The foster mother unhooked Clare's coat from the rack. "I appreciate that. I'm sure they're perfectly nice people. Just terrible eager for their baby. Waiting on a baby when you can't have one of your own makes folks a little crazy at times."

THE Burnses' house was a brick Italianate revival with five-foot-high windows and a cupola that must have given them a view of the entire town. Clare had been directed there by the receptionist at the Burnses' law office, who told her Geoff was in court and Karen was working at home.

Karen Burns opened at the second ring. "Reverend Fergusson? What brings you out here?"

"Well, I . . ." Clare stamped her boots on the welcome mat.

"Please, come on in. No need to stand in the cold to talk."

Clare pushed into the hall and hung up her coat.

"Is this about the letter-writing campaign? I've gotten some wonderfully supportive notes and phone calls from people, you know." Karen led Clare into a small den done up in burgundy and hunter green and gestured toward a tapestry-covered love seat.

Clare sat. She took a steadying breath. "Karen, I didn't come to discuss the letters."

Karen sank gracefully into a green leather chair. "You didn't."

"I know that the police have been asking you about the night Darrell McWhorter was killed. I know you both claim to have come straight home from work."

"Claim?"

Clare leaned forward. "I know Geoff wasn't at home at eight o'clock that night. He was at Cody's foster mother's house. Wearing a suit and tie, as if he'd come straight from work, and smelling as if he'd had a drink or two. Karen, what happened that night?"

Karen looked toward the bookcase. "Nothing." She compressed her lips into a tight line. "I don't know."

"Tell me what you do know."

The other woman continued staring at the bookcase. Clare touched her arm. "Please, Karen, I want to help you and Geoff. But you have to be honest with me."

There was a pause. Slowly Karen turned her head to face the priest. "We had a horrible fight that afternoon in the office about what approach to take with McWhorter, and we got . . . it just . . . Anyway, I told him what he could do and took off." She blew out a breath. "I did a little shopping. I called my mother. Dinnertime came and went, with no Geoff and no phone call. I started to get worried. The weather was bad, and he was driving the little Honda Civic. Finally he showed up around ten or so." She shook her head. "Turns out he'd been out at the Dew Drop Inn most of the night. I

don't know how he managed to get himself home. He was in no condition to drive. He could have killed himself."

"Does this happen often?" Clare asked, her voice neutral.

"God, no. Geoff's idea of a blowout is a bottle of Beaujolais Nouveaux the week it hits the stores. So you can imagine how I felt when those two officers showed up at the door asking where we had been that evening! I told them we'd been home all night watching TV. Geoff just went along with my story." Her gaze went to the ceiling. "Yesterday, when we learned that McWhorter had been killed, it was too late to recant. There wasn't anyone except a few bar patrons to say he'd been at the Dew Drop instead of . . ."

"Instead of taking Darrell McWhorter on his last drive?"

"Yes. We had already lied to the police. It looked bad."

Clare tilted her head back, closing her eyes. "Do you believe your husband's story about what happened Wednesday night?"

"Yes, of course. He would never lie to me."

"Then tell Chief Van Alstyne. Go to his office, tell him what you've just told me, and offer to enroll Geoff in one of those driver education courses. Voluntarily."

"What? They can't prove drunk driving after the fact."

"We're not talking about legalities, Karen. We're talking about admitting you did something wrong and setting it right. Besides, if you don't cop to the drinking and driving and lying, your husband's going to look like a murderer when the police do find out."

Karen pressed her hand to her forehead, shielding her face from Clare's stare. "There's a chance they won't find out," she said.

Clare exploded. "There's no chance Chief Van Alstyne won't find out, Karen, because if you don't tell him, I will!"

"You can't do that!"

"I can't tell him anything of this conversation we're having right now, no. I can certainly tell him DHS called me to complain that your husband was at Cody's foster mother's house Wednesday night. And I can tell him Deborah McDonald confirmed Geoff smelled like he'd been drinking."

Clare paused. "I'll do everything I can to help you become

Cody's parents. But I won't compromise the truth for you. I won't help you stand in the way of finding Katie McWhorter's killer. We owe her that. We all owe her that."

HARLENE punched the intercom button. "Chief? Reverend Clare's here to see you. And Karen Burns."

The door to his office banged open, and the chief of police strode out. His gaze flicked between Clare and Karen.

"Mrs. Burns?" he said. "Reverend Fergusson?"

Karen looked uneasily at Clare. "I . . . uh . . . was going to wait for my husband, but he's being held over in a deposition."

Russ's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "Why don't you two come into the interview room with me. We can be more private there."

Karen nodded. Russ looked at Clare hard while pulling out a chair for Karen. Clare raised her eyebrows, radiating encouragement. He took a seat opposite Karen while Clare seated herself.

"Mind if I tape this? I hate to have misunderstandings later on because we're remembering different things." He rested his hand easily on a cheap portable tape recorder.

Karen frowned. "As long as you make it clear I'm speaking without an attorney."

He nodded, turning on the tape machine. "This is Chief Van Alstyne, interviewing Karen Burns. Ms. Burns is unrepresented by legal counsel. The date is Friday, December tenth, and the time is"—he glanced at his watch—"six p.m."

Karen took a deep breath and began. Clare listened to her voice, calm and orderly. She must make a dynamic advocate in court. Russ, on the other hand, looked less than impressed.

When she concluded her story, Karen folded her hands, as if waiting for comment. Russ chewed the inside of his cheek for a moment. "Your husband was driving a Honda Civic that night?"

"That's correct. He uses it when the roads are salty."

"Has he driven it anywhere since that night?"

"Yes. He's got it today. Why?"

"Mrs. Burns, when you spoke to our officers Wednesday night,

you said you own a 9-millimeter Smith and Wesson, registered to yourself, and that you keep it in your Land Rover."

"That's correct."

"Is that gun still in your Land Rover?"

"Yes."

Russ nodded. He popped the tape from the machine and rose from the table. "Will you wait here for a moment? I'll be right back." He closed the door on his way out.

Karen pushed her chair back and stood. "Clare, I don't like this. I do not like this at all."

Clare rose to reassure her. "Karen, we knew he'd be suspicious. After all, you did lie before. I'm sure he just wants to check with someone at the Dew Drop Inn."

The door opened, and Russ and Officer Durkee walked in.

Russ cleared his throat and held up a curling sheet of fax paper. "Karen Burns," he began formally, "I have here a warrant to search your cars and to confiscate any firearms in your or your husband's possession for testing. We are also warranted to search your house for any materials related to the deaths of Katie McWhorter and Darrell McWhorter." He folded the piece of paper carefully. "Judge Ryswick thought our new information was sufficient to issue a separate warrant for your husband's arrest."

Karen's posture went rigid.

"However, I won't execute the arrest if Geoff presents himself to the station for questioning within the next two hours. I've sent someone to your office to let him know. Officer Durkee will accompany you to your vehicle."

Karen shot Clare a venomous glance, then turned and swept out of the interview room, Officer Durkee close on her heels.

Clare faced Russ. "This is absolutely outrageous!"

"Stay out of it, Clare."

"Stay out of it? I'm the one who persuaded her to come in here and tell you the truth! I assured her you would listen to her. I thought—"

"No, you didn't think. You just jumped in feetfirst without con-

sidering the consequences. I'm a cop! What did you expect me to do when a woman I suspect is an accessory to two murders walks in and tells me her husband was drunk and unaccounted for during the time Darrell McWhorter was killed? Give her a good-citizenship badge?"

Clare pressed her hands flat against the table to keep them from shaking. "I was trying to help."

"You were trying to help the Burnses, yeah, I know. And every other damn soul you come across. That's why you're a priest, Clare. I, on the other hand, am a cop. The only thing I'm trying to do is catch the sonofabitch who killed Katie McWhorter and her father. If that interferes with your agenda, I'm sorry. But don't act the outraged innocent with me when I'm doing my job."

Clare flushed hotly. "You can kiss my ass!" She spun on her heel and stalked out of the room past the main desk. Behind her, she could hear Russ's voice, exasperated: "Clare. Clare!"

She burst out into the icy night air and swung around the corner into the station parking lot.

Karen was standing next to her Land Rover, arms folded. Officer Durkee was inside, his flashlight bouncing off the windows and mirrors. Karen's lips pinched together when she saw Clare. "I'm not going to be able to give you a lift back to my place. My vehicle's going to be out of commission for a while."

"Karen," Clare began, "I'm so sorry."

"I'm sure you are. And I'm sure that when this is all over, I'll be able to listen to your apology. But right now I'd rather you just leave me and my husband alone."

Clare could feel a hot pricking behind her eyes. "Of course." She bobbed her head and left the parking lot as fast as she could. What had she been thinking? She had been dismayed that the Burnses had lied to the police. She had been . . . pleased with herself, bringing a new piece of information to Russ, like some dog showing off a trick.

She stopped at an intersection and waited for cars to pass. Damn, it was cold. Her ears already ached, and it was another mile at least to the Burnses' house, where her car was parked.

The light turned green, and she crossed. The flash of red lights and brief blurp of a siren jerked her attention to the road. A cruiser was pacing her, its passenger-side window rolled down.

"Get in. I'll drive you."

"No," she told the car.

"For God's sake, Clare, get in the damn car!"

"No."

"Fine, dammit. Be that way!" The cruiser drove off.

In the fading rumble of its engine, Clare wrapped her arms and her self-righteousness around her and trudged on into the night.

WEEKENDS were peak time for the Millers Kill Infirmary. Children and grandchildren, busy Monday through Friday, would come for visits Saturday and Sunday. So far, Clare had kept her visits to weekdays, but Mr. Howard's niece had asked her to stop by to encourage the old gentleman, who had just gotten over a rough bout of pneumonia, so here she was on a Saturday morning.

After seeing Mr. Howard, Clare stood at the nurses station and flipped through the roster of residents, finding names she knew, reading the notes to see if anyone was doing poorly. A door marked DIRECTOR OF NURSING suddenly opened, and the doorway was filled with an enormous bear of a man, luxuriously bearded and smelling of pipe smoke. His gaze fell on Clare. He reached out with his right hand. "I'm Paul Foubert. Director of Nursing."

"Clare Fergusson. I'm the new priest at St. Alban's."

"Yep, the collar kind of gives you away. Why don't you come in for a minute or two?"

The director of nursing's office was appropriately denlike in brick and wood. Foubert gestured to one of the comfortable chairs facing his desk before settling himself into an armchair.

"So how long have you been at St. Alban's?"

Clare propped her leg on the opposite knee. "A little over a month. It's been . . . hectic."

Foubert picked up a pipe and tamped in fresh tobacco. "What do you think of our Infirmary?"

"It seems like a good facility. The staff members I've met have all been pleasant and helpful. Caring."

"Mmmm. I've been fortunate to be able to get good people, both staff and volunteers."

Clare glanced at the wall opposite the windows, which held a photo collage that stretched a good three feet square. She could pick out shots of parties and Christmas celebrations, elderly residents surrounded by family, doctors in white lab coats, and nurses in cheerful print smocks. She was struck by a sudden thought. "Are there pictures of all your volunteers here?"

"There sure are. We couldn't run this place without them."

"You must have a photo of Katie McWhorter, then."

Foubert's pleasant expression tightened. "I read about her in the paper. She was a wonderful kid. A little too much on the serious side for her age but a damn hard worker." He rose from behind his desk and hunkered down in front of the collage. "Here she is. This was taken last year at the Christmas party."

Clare got out of her chair for a better view. "Who's the boy with his arm around her?"

"That's her sweetheart, Wes Fowler. He was another volunteer." Foubert laughed softly. "They used to take breaks together, go out to his car. Later I'd see them come in all pinked up and grinning. Kids." His smile faded. "What a waste."

Clare sat back in her chair. Her ears buzzed.

Wes Fowler.

Golden boy. From a family that had everything the McWhorters didn't. He had everything going for him, including an appointment to West Point and a beautiful girlfriend from a well-respected family. What would a boy like that do to hide a screwup? A life-altering, won't-go-away-for-the-next-eighteen-years screwup?

She was going to have to tell Vaughn Fowler and his wife about this. Oh, God.

"Reverend Fergusson? Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm okay." She stood up and smiled at him. "I do need to be going, though. I just remembered something important."

"All right, then." He stood up to open the office door. "Stop by the next time you're visiting, will you?"

"I sure will do that, yes." She took off with indecent haste.

Wes Fowler! My God!

THERE was a Pathfinder parked next to the Fowlers' Explorer at the top of their long drive. Clare pulled in close behind them and killed her engine. She rested her head on the steering wheel for a moment, looking for strength, asking for the right words to come.

Gravel and snow crunched underfoot as she walked up to the Fowlers' sweeping white clapboard home and rang the bell.

"Reverend Fergusson! What brings you out here?"

Edith Fowler was a slender, horsy-looking woman. Her short brown hair was clipped to a no-nonsense length, and she wore pearls and a monogrammed turtleneck.

"Honey? Who is it?" Vaughn Fowler crowded around as his wife stood back to let Clare in. "Clare. This is an unexpected pleasure."

Clare pulled off her police parka. "I apologize for intruding, but I needed to speak with you." Edith Fowler took the coat and hung it in the hall closet. "Both of you."

The couple looked at each other. "We're entertaining right now," Edith said hesitantly.

"It shouldn't take long. It is important."

Vaughn gestured her through the kitchen door. "Of course." Inside the kitchen, preparations for a brunch were obviously in progress. Beside the counter, sipping what looked like mimosas, stood the Shatthams. Clare smiled feebly. Great. They were probably getting ready to toast Wes and Alyson's engagement or something.

The Shatthams greeted her warmly, which made her feel even guiltier for what she was about to lay on the Fowlers. "Clare needs to speak with me and Edith for a few minutes," Vaughn said. "I know you two can entertain yourselves. We'll be in my study."

Vaughn let Clare and his wife enter the room, then shut the door behind them. The study was a monument to Fowler's military career. Photos and trophies and a few threadbare battalion flags.

Clare took a deep breath. "Sir, you recall when Chief Van Alstyne was showing the photographs of the dead girl in the parish hall? We now know her identity."

"Yes, I know. Mitch and Barb told us all about it. Alyson identified her as one of her classmates."

"Yes, sir. Her name was Katie McWhorter." Clare clasped her hands behind her back. "Today I discovered your son was seeing her secretly. They were volunteers at the Infirmary together, as well as being in the same class at the high school. It probably started in the fall and was certainly going on at Christmastime last year."

"Wait a minute," Fowler said, turning toward his wife. "Wasn't he going out with Alyson last year?"

"Of course he was." Edith Fowler frowned at Clare. "Reverend Fergusson, I'm afraid I don't see that this is any business of yours."

Clare bit the tip of her tongue. "Katie McWhorter had a baby just a week or so before she was killed. So far, the police haven't been able to identify the baby's father."

"So far? Are you suggesting—"

"Calm down, Edie. Clare, you don't know our son. If anything, he's overly responsible. Maybe he did have a little romance with this girl, but there's no way he'd risk a pregnancy."

"Well, somebody accompanied Katie to a local motel around Thanksgiving and stayed with her while she had her baby. She named him Cody, wrote a note asking that he be adopted by Geoff and Karen Burns, and left him on the kitchen steps at St. Alban's, despite having no connection to the church. Wes was home around Thanksgiving, right? And he's a member of the church. He would have known about the Burnses looking for a child."

Edith Fowler covered her mouth for a moment. "Oh, dear God. Vaughn, do you think . . . ?"

Fowler looked at the floor, frowning. "Have you been to the police with this yet?"

"No. Chief Van Alstyne is"—she paused, reining in the anger she still felt from yesterday—"anxious to find the killer. I'm afraid that

if he hears about the connection between Wes and Katie, he'll leap straight to the conclusion that Wes murdered her. And probably Darrell McWhorter as well."

Darrell had seen Wes's picture on the parish bulletin board before changing his mind about giving Cody to the Burnses. Maybe Wes was a murderer, but she was going to make sure she had gathered some evidence before handing the boy over to Russ. "Let me check this out some before we involve the police," she said.

Vaughn nodded. "I want Wes here to answer questions." He looked at his watch. "I can head for West Point later this afternoon and bring him back tomorrow morning first thing."

"Good. I'm going down to Albany. Katie's sister gave me the address. I'll talk to Katie's housemates and see what they remember. Do you have a picture of Wes I could borrow?"

"Here, take this." Edith Fowler grabbed a large bound volume off the coffee table. "It's his high school yearbook."

Vaughn opened the door. In the kitchen the Shatthams were intently poring over cookbooks. Clare wondered just how soundproof the study door was.

In the hall foyer, Edith handed Clare her coat.

There was a noise from the kitchen entrance. "We wanted to say good-bye," Mitchell Shattham said hesitantly as he and his wife came into the hall.

"We'll want to get in touch with you as soon as you're back from Albany," Vaughn said.

"I'll stop by my office. You can leave me a message, and I'll call you from there." She tucked the yearbook under her arm and shook hands with the Fowlers. "I'm sorry to lay all this on you," she said. "I sincerely hope I'm wrong." She waved to the Shatthams as she stepped off the porch.

In her car, she let her head drop back against the headrest. She could hear the familiar flat pulsing of rotors. She pressed her face against the window. There it was, at maybe eight hundred feet, flying northwest. Looked like a Bell AH-51. She rubbed a hand over her dry lips. God. She wished she were up there right now.

CHAPTER NINE

EMILY Colbaum was a tiny, fey girl with huge brown eyes. She stood in the doorway of the room she had once shared with Katie McWhorter. "You see, Reverend? I mean, I'm not a complete slob, but it would be hard to know what went missing."

Clare crawled backward from underneath Katie's bed. "I'm really not so concerned about what the man took. I was hoping maybe there was something left behind. A photograph, a phone message, something." She clambered to her feet.

"The cops were pretty thorough. Of course, I think they were thinking, like, drugs or something." Emily crossed her arms. "But Katie wasn't like that. I couldn't even believe it when they told me she'd had a baby. We all thought she was just putting on weight."

"Hey, who's here?" A black girl trailing layers of knitwear sidled around Emily into the room. "Hi, I'm Ebony."

"Ebony rooms with Sara, across the hall. Ebony, this is Reverend Clare. She's kind of helping Katie's sister."

"Hi, Ebony." Clare rose and shook the girl's hand. "I have a yearbook from Katie's high school downstairs. There are some pictures of the boy who might be the father of Katie's baby—his name is Wes. Did she ever mention that name?"

Ebony and Emily looked at each other. "Nope."

"Would you take a look at the yearbook? Just in case?"

In the living room, the girls sat on the sofa while Clare put the yearbook on the coffee table. "This is his senior picture."

"No. I've never seen this guy." Ebony leafed through a few pages. "Hey, Em. Isn't this that girl who came to see Katie at the beginning of the year?" On a page of candid photographs, Ebony had one finger squarely on a *Seventeen*-magazine blonde in a formfitting tie-dyed dress.

"Alyson Shattham was here visiting Katie?" Clare asked.

"It wasn't, like, a social call." Emily said. "She had some sort of problem with Katie. She was very rude. They went into the kitchen to talk and shut the door."

"Did Katie ever tell you what they talked about?"

"No. She was very private. She would change the subject if you asked if she was okay. She didn't want to burden anybody."

Clare picked up the yearbook. "I think I'll show this around at the computer center where Katie worked." She glanced out the window. "Then I'd better head back home. I don't want to get caught in any more of this upstate weather."

CLARE checked her mirror, changed lanes, and adjusted the radio tuner. Traffic was light on the Northway this Saturday afternoon.

"WNCR's accu-weather update!" the speakers blared. "A low-pressure system is moving in fast from the northeast. Look for snow to start midafternoon, with accumulations from four to six inches along the Hudson Valley, higher in the mountains."

"Wonderful," Clare muttered. Didn't it ever stop snowing up here? She might as well have left Albany right after talking with Emily and Ebony instead of waiting and risking driving into the storm. No one at the university's computer center could recall seeing Katie with Wes or Alyson. So Alyson had lied straight-out to her, Russ, and her parents. Maybe Wes had thrown her over for Katie. Could she have murdered in a fit of jealousy? Maybe Alyson and Wes both did it, like that high school couple out in Texas who had murdered a girl who threatened their romance.

She sighed. She was going to have to call Russ and tell him everything she'd found out. Maybe he had been right to jump on the Burnses. Not because they had been guilty, but because trying to put together the events of the crime with only pieces of motivation and insight was hopeless. Real physical evidence—that's what pointed the finger at the guilty.

She pulled into the tiny parking area behind St. Alban's an hour or so before sunset, grateful to have beaten the storm. She unlocked

the back door and made her way up to her office, where she reached for the phone.

"Millers Kill Police. May I help you?"

"Harlene? It's Clare Fergusson. Is the chief in?"

"He sure isn't, Clare. But I know he's been trying to get ahold of you. Want to leave a message?"

"He's been trying to reach me? Okay. Yes, tell him I'll be here at my office for a couple of hours. I need to speak with him about Katie McWhorter's case."

"I'll do that. Have a good one."

"Thanks, Harlene." She clunked down the receiver. May as well get her messages and start returning calls. Maybe the Fowlers had spoken to Wes and persuaded him to tell the truth about his relationship with Katie.

Six or seven pink memo slips poked out of her mail cubbie on the wall. Inquiry about a christening. Possible new members. "Chief Van Alstyne called, no message." "Kristen McWhorter called, left no return number. Most urgent," underscored by Lois's confident pen. "Has info re: who killed her father. She and mother are hiding out at cousin's hunting cabin. Please come at once." Detailed directions to the cabin covered the pink slip and continued onto another.

"Lois!" Clare said to her fireplace. "Couldn't you put the most urgent one on top? Holy cow." She quickly donned the police parka and stuffed the directions into her pocket. Kristen's call had come in at noon, three and a half hours ago. She must be frantic by now.

Outside, snow was showering down in tiny dry flakes. There wasn't that much accumulation yet. If it took her less than an hour to reach the cabin, she shouldn't have too much difficulty with the roads. The MG's engine roared to life reassuringly. Of course, she might not be able to get back out until the storm finished up. When she had been young and romantic, she had fantasized about being snowbound in a rustic cabin. But she had for sure never pictured Brenda McWhorter in there with her.

Route 9 North was well trafficked and easy to drive. She exited near Lake Lucerne and took River Road south. A right onto Ten-

ant Mountain Road turned her due west, where far fewer cars kept her company. In front of her there was only an iron shell of sky and the snow, falling faster and harder against her windshield.

She spotted Alan's Gas and Grocery, the landmark mentioned in her directions. From here it was two miles to the road leading directly up into the mountains. If she drove carefully, she'd be fine. Two miles to the turnoff. Six miles to the camp road. Less than a mile to the cabin. Then she would whap Kristen upside the head for not leaving a phone number where she could be reached.

She slowed as she hit the two-mile mark. Two large stone cairns marked the otherwise signless road. She set the trip odometer to zero and turned. The MG pulled steadily along the line of ascent as the road wound its way up the mountain. Kristen had better have been dead-on accurate about the miles to the turnoff, or she was going to be lost but good. The trip odometer crawled toward the six-mile mark. She sped up the wipers, peering through the curtain of snow for the entrance to the camp road. The light had leached almost entirely away by now. She tried switching her high beams on, but the dizzying flurry of snowflakes was disorienting.

Up ahead, there was a gap in the wall of trees. She slowed and rolled down her window for a better look. It was hard to tell, but the faint depressions under the new-fallen snow seemed to be tire tracks from earlier in the day. She rolled the window back up and carefully turned. Ahead, the road rose along a lengthy, uneven incline. She clutched the steering wheel, downshifted, and stepped on the gas.

"Come on. Come on." The car crept upward. "Almost there, almost there." Clare tromped down on the gas pedal a final time, laughing in triumph as the front wheels dug in, held, and hauled her over the crest of the hill. She instantly surged downhill, the car twisting violently to the left. She yanked her foot off the gas and slammed on her brakes. The front wheels locked. She skidded downhill, the car swinging sideways, tipping.

Clare shrieked involuntarily as the car's undercarriage slammed into something low and hard, then shrieked again as she tipped for real this time, crashing and bouncing and crunching over and over.

STILLNESS AND DARK. SHE heaved for air, shuddering gasps in the silent aftermath. She hung from her shoulder belt, her left arm pressing against shattered glass. Her car had come to rest on its side. Above her what had been the passenger-side window was slowly whiting out under the falling snow.

She breathed in deeply, feeling for pain in her lungs or ribs. She shifted her legs carefully. All her joints moved, and nothing seemed to be grinding or poking out. She had to get out of the car. She fumbled at her seatbelt, then pulled at the passenger-door latch. It stuck. She braced her boots on the remains of the driver's door and yanked at the latch again, throwing her shoulder against the door at the same time. It popped open, and Clare scrambled out.

She balanced unsteadily on a steep field of boulders and jagged rock, halfway down a crevasse that cut through the mountain as far as she could see. Five or six yards beneath her it bottomed out in a wide stream, whose black waters ran fast enough to have kept it from icing over. Above her, the camp road slanted down to two cement pilings and then vanished into thin air. Reluctantly she looked at the MG. She made a small noise in her throat, resolutely turned away, and picked her way uphill slowly.

Across the gorge there were twin pilings and more road. A bridge had been here. Once. Which meant either Kristen's directions got garbled or she had taken a wrong turn or someone had sent her here. Deliberately. The thought made her skin prickle.

She hiked the rest of the way up to the crest of the road. She was close to ten miles away from the last outpost of civilization she'd seen, and although her parka was keeping her upper body warm, she could already feel goose bumps beneath her cotton khakis. Her toes ached with cold. At what point would she start permanently damaging her flesh? She pulled the parka hood up and tied it under her chin. Normally, she could walk a mile in fifteen minutes. She started down the road, stepping inside the rapidly filling tire tracks. Snow, uneven terrain—say it would take half again as long to go a mile. Twenty-two minutes or so.

All right. Ten miles to Alan's Gas and Grocery would take her

about four hours. What about another cabin? She could hike down the mountain until she reached the closest camp road. But if she couldn't find a place within a mile of the main road, she would have to retrace her steps. She lit up her watch. Almost five o'clock. Could she trust herself to stay on a narrow, unplowed road at night with a heavy snow falling? Already the underwater blueness was thickening, making distance impossible to judge.

The thought she had been pushing aside crystallized, unavoidable: I could die out here.

She stepped into a particularly deep depression one of her tires had spun into the snow and thought about the 139th Psalm. It had been a dim twilight, like this one, the sky dark with rain. She had been sitting by Grace's bedside, her sister's hand resting weightlessly in hers. Their father had read the 139th Psalm in his deep, soft voice. *"If I say, Surely, the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me. Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee; but the night shineth as the day."* It had been the last time they had all been together. Clare felt an urgent closeness to her sister, a moment of absolute certainty that death was just a pocket trick, that the dead were all around her, supporting her, giving her strength.

A dark shape emerged from the bend in the road before her.

Clare blinked. Her heart thumped once, hard, and she halted in her tracks, muscles tensing.

The bulky figure moved ahead a step. Clare opened her mouth to speak when a flashlight beam suddenly speared her. It was a person in a snowmobile suit.

"Take off your coat," a voice hissed. The voice was guttural, deep, as unidentifiable as the figure behind it. The flashlight beam dipped low, as if the person had shifted it in his grasp, and Clare heard the distinctive sound of a round being chambered in an automatic pistol.

Her throat closed. Heat surged through her body. She picked up a stick and hurled it as hard as she could toward the flashlight, then dived headfirst for the brush at the side of the road.

The gun went off, shattering the stillness like an axe through thin

ice, dwarfing a strangled scream of "Dammit!" Sprawled beneath a fir tree, Clare saw the flashlight beam arch crazily into the sky. She got to her feet and took off, running, dodging ancient oaks and stands of fir. She tripped and fell, regained her footing, and plunged through the snow, her breath sawing in her ears.

At a slight rise she climbed a toppled pine tree to get her bearings. If, as she thought, her attacker had dropped his flashlight, as soon as he found it, he'd be on her trail. She turned away from where she'd been, staking out the lay of the land ahead. Somewhere to her left was the mountain road. If she lost that, she was dead.

She struck out for where she thought the road must be, picking her route slowly and carefully, jumping from tree fall to tree fall. She couldn't leave a clean trail, but she could put breaks in it, make it hard to follow. He must have a vehicle somewhere, not too far from where he ran into her.

She had a head start. And she had one other advantage: He had underestimated her. Her survival school instructor at Edgeland AFB, a shiny-headed old warrant officer nicknamed Hardball, told them, "Biggest advantage any woman's got in an escape-and-evasion situation is the fact that ninety-nine percent of the men she runs into won't look past the fact she's a girl!"

She paused near an old hemlock, its trunk studded with dozens of branches. She looked up, the snow pelting her eyelashes. Time to locate an ambush site. The only way out of this forest now would be over the body of the man hunting her. She went up the hemlock hand over foot, showering down snow. She climbed as high as she could and bent back a heavily needled branch to take in the view.

Too close for comfort, she could see the bobbing and twitching of a flashlight. She needed to find high ground. Someplace she could lure him up to, letting him tire himself out.

To her right a series of steep little hillocks rose from the general downward slope of the mountain. It would mean heading away from the road, but there were thickets of evergreens mixed in with the birches and maples, perfect for what she had in mind. If she were quick enough, she could backtrack to the small ridge where she had

stumbled and make her trail from there, something big and obvious to lead him to the ambush. And her real route . . . She squinted, wishing for binoculars. The last hillock was cut by a darker gash, part of the crevasse that had taken her car. Running water would explain the little hills, harder stone rising from the softer earth of the mountain, eroded away each spring. She bit her lip. The crevasse it would be. She descended from the hemlock and retraced her trail to the spot where she had stumbled and fallen. From there she set out for her ambush site, taking the most direct route possible to the thickest clump of fir trees at the edge of the first small hill.

It would look, she hoped, as if she had seen a potential hiding place and bolted. She turned and shuffled back to the ridge, careful not to stray outside the path she had laid down. Back at her starting point she picked her way downhill, this time trying to conceal her footprints from her hunter's view.

She hit the crevasse unexpectedly and clambered down its length. Balanced on a rock edging the black, rushing water, she hesitated for only a heartbeat. Then she stepped in. The water rose just over her ankles but was so cold it brought tears to her eyes. She jogged downstream, slowly at first, picking up speed as she got her footing on the smooth cobbled stones lining the stream. On and on she sloshed through the almost freezing water, unable to think of anything except her misery. It wasn't until she looked up and saw the darker outcropping of heavy stone that she realized she had reached the hillocks. She thrashed her way to the shore.

Between the water and the snow was a tumble of smooth stones, wet but still free of ice. Clare bent over and picked one up. It hefted well, about five pounds. It was as close as she was going to get to an offensive weapon. She stowed it in one of the parka's pockets, where it banged against her thigh every time she drew her leg up to climb the hillside.

The ascent was difficult. She squelched through the snow, keeping to the far side of the slope, her head a handsbreadth above the crest of the hill. By a cluster of tall firs she went over the top, crawling on her elbows and knees to keep her profile low. The pines she

had made a path to were a dozen yards away and almost directly below. He would step around them, and when he found she wasn't there, he would head up to the next obvious hidey-hole, the firs near the crest of the hill. On his left he would see birches growing too thickly to make an easy route up the hill. So he would go to the left of the firs. She hoped.

She reversed direction, backtracking a half-dozen steps. A little more than halfway between the two clusters of evergreens, she spotted what she wanted. A birch sapling, a couple feet taller than her head and slim enough to wrap her hand around. She yanked open the bow beneath her chin and pulled the long drawstring out of the parka's hood. Reaching as high as she could along the sapling, she drew its slender length down. She looped one end of the drawstring near the top of the sapling's trunk and tied off tightly.

Scarcely two yards away lay the brown remains of a toppled fir: low cover if she dug down and stayed flat. Only problem was, the drawstring wouldn't reach that far.

In the distance a light winked. Clare's stomach squeezed. She abandoned the sapling, string dangling, for the nearest hemlock. She grabbed a flexible, living branch from low near the ground, pulled it taut, and smashed her heel over the juncture where it grew from the trunk. The branch snapped free. She had scarcely felt the blow with her foot. That had to be a bad sign.

The light flashed again and again in the darkness. She retrieved the loose end of the drawstring and tied it with the feathery tip of the branch in a double knot. She pulled down on her string and branch, bringing the sapling over in an arch, retreating toward the desiccated corpse of the fir. The branch and the drawstring held. One-handed, she tossed the heavy river stone beneath the dead fir and settled down flat on her belly.

She pulled on the birch with two hands now, the tension in the branch cutting into her gloves. The sapling was almost buried in the snow. It looked, she hoped, like a large fallen branch. Something a tired and angry man wouldn't think twice about stepping over.

She disciplined her breath to a deep, even relaxation, and held

perfectly still, letting herself be covered by a layer of falling snow.

Below her she heard a noise. Tilting her head a fraction of an inch, she saw the faint glow of the flashlight beam playing over the tops of the fir trees. The light shifted, disappeared, then reappeared. It hit the birch trees, canted to the left, and then swung straight across toward her hiding place. The flashlight was rocking, coming closer. There was no sound of footsteps, no telltale crunch or snap or rustle. The thick, dry snow swallowed everything.

Clare could make him out behind the light now, the padded outline of a man, face concealed behind an enveloping ski mask. He held the flashlight high, with his other arm pointed down, away from his side. Keeping the gun muzzle away from his body.

A few more steps would bring him into range. Everything except her awareness of him faded away, and she watched intently as he moved closer and closer toward the kill. Just a few more steps.

The flashlight beam played over the trees at the top of the hill. Clare squeezed her hands around the branch. He shifted the flashlight and scanned the first group of trees again. One. More. Step. His face turned downhill, he walked into her trap.

CLARE let go the draw. She heard, rather than saw, the snap of the sapling whipping the air. She seized the river rock and was on her feet before the full force of the young tree caught her assailant across the shoulders and back. The gun went off with a deafening hammer clap. His yell of pain cut off abruptly as he crashed belly-first into the snow. She launched herself into the air, smashed full-length onto his back, levered herself to a straddle, and raised the rock over the back of his wool-covered skull. Her killing blow fell off-center. He gurgled and sagged limply beneath her thighs.

She scrambled backward and staggered into a standing position. She drew back one ice-stiffened boot and kicked the sprawling form as hard as she could between his legs. No reaction. He was either dead or unconscious.

She dropped to her knees and shoved both hands underneath him, flipping him. She tugged her gloves off and unsnapped the big

pockets on the thighs of his snowmobile suit, digging frantically for keys to a car, a truck, a snowmobile. Nothing. Whatever he drove, the keys must still be in it. She pulled her gloves back on. She would have to make her way back to the junction of the camp and mountain roads. He had to have parked near where he first assaulted her.

She looked about for the gun. The flashlight was lighting up the snowbank, but she didn't see a weapon anywhere. She retrieved the flashlight and played the light over the snow. Nothing. She blew out a breath in frustration.

She crouched at the man's head and tugged at the ski mask covering everything except his closed eyes. It was a long one, the dark wool disappearing into his snowmobile suit, and was either caught in the zipper or fastened inside. It stretched slightly but stayed on.

She circled around him and crouched just below his feet. He wore hunting boots tucked beneath the elastic opening of his suit. Clare pushed the padded nylon up his calf. His boot was laced and knotted tightly, so she yanked her gloves off again to unhook the laces. Then she wrenched the boot off. He moaned.

Clare shoved the other snowmobile-suit leg up out of the way, tore at the top knot of his left boot, and yanked it off. He moaned again. Clare dropped the flashlight into one of her pockets, tucked a boot under each arm, and scrambled downhill. It took her several seconds to find the false trail she had laid down. Night was no longer imminent; it had arrived, and details that had stood out in the twilight were completely obscured by the darkness and the falling snow.

She headed for the spot beneath the ridge where she had started her ambush trail. If she had kept the relative directions straight in her mind, that ridge should lead toward the mountain road.

From the hillside behind her she heard an enraged bellow. There was a sound of branches cracking. Was he coming after her? Clare churned through the snow, desperate to find that ridge.

She reached it and fell when her nerveless feet rolled over a branch and sent her sprawling. At the top of the ridge she crouched, looking for her old tracks. She finally found a few, but they were vanishing under the falling snow. She stood up and

waded on ahead. The cold stole inside quietly, implacably. Her legs had gone numb. Even her brain seemed stiff with cold. Instead of listening alertly for any noise from her attacker, she found herself drifting.

With a start she realized she had run out of ridge. The thin spine of rock had melded seamlessly into the forest floor, no slope on either side of her to keep her headed in one direction. Nothing to keep her from wandering in circles until she surrendered to the cold. Angry, frustrated tears flooded her eyes and spilled over. She breathed in shakily. Okay. She would navigate by line-sighting between trees. Tree by tree, she would try to keep to a straight path.

She had to force her legs to move. She sighted a marker tree and stumbled through the snow. When she reached it, she did it again.

When she caught the first flash of light from the corner of her eye, it almost didn't register. It flashed again, and she jerked her head left. It was a flashlight beam, a strong one, casting through the forest from some distance away. Either she was saved or there were two of them. All she had to do was find out which.

"DISPATCH Ten fifty, this is unit Ten fifty-seven." Russ gingerly picked up the Styrofoam cup of hot cocoa and blew on it.

"Unit Ten fifty-seven, this is dispatch."

"Hey, Harlene. You get ahold of Lyle and Noble?"

"I reached Lyle. Haven't been able to find Noble yet."

Russ took a sip and swiped whipped cream off his upper lip. His arteries were probably clogging even as he idled in the Kreemie Kakes parking lot, but on a stormy winter afternoon nothing beat their homemade hot chocolate. He'd do penance later tonight when Linda served up frozen diet dinners. "Keep trying. Two Saturdays before Christmas nobody's gonna let a snowstorm stop 'em from shopping. I want to make sure we have enough men on the road."

"That's why I'm doing my shopping over the phone this year."

Russ took another sip before keying his mike. "Did you know Linda wants to put out a catalogue?" It was all she could talk about when he had picked her up at the train station noontime.

"Good for her! Sell enough of those curtains, and you can retire."

"That's the plan." He slid the chocolate into a cup holder. "Dispatch, I'm rolling out of Main and Canal, heading for Route 47. Anything else?"

"Reverend Fergusson called a half hour ago. Said she'd be in her office until five thirty. Want me to raise her for you?"

He tapped the microphone against his chin.

"No," he said. "I'll swing by that way. Let me know if you can't get Noble. We may have to call in one of the part-time guys. It's gonna be a mess out here within a few hours."

THE church was dark when Russ pulled into the tiny parking area out back, but he could see lights shining from the attached building that housed the offices and parish hall. He followed the walkway around the parish hall until he reached the big double door.

"Clare? It's me. Russ." In Clare's office her appointment book and a fistful of pink message slips sat on her desk.

"Clare? You here?" He glanced at her appointment book. Nothing for Saturday except a morning visit to the Infirmary. He flipped through the message slips. Nothing. He walked down the hall to the main office, snapped on the lights, and dropped into the secretary's chair. Next to the phone was a spiral-bound book for written messages, yellow carbon copies, and unused pink tear-out squares. There were carbon records of his calls and, slopping over two spaces, a detailed message he hadn't seen on Clare's desk.

A meeting with Kristen McWhorter up in the mountains? He closed his eyes, envisioning the route described on the message copy. Somewhere around Tenant Mountain? It would be a tough drive for Clare's car. He dialed the station. "Harlene? I need you to find a phone number for me. Kristen McWhorter."

He traced the slashes underlining "Urgent!" while waiting for Harlene to return with the number. Jumping into that piece of flashy junk and driving into the mountains without stopping to think about the consequences sounded just like Clare. Somebody needed to teach that woman to measure twice and cut once.

When Harlene rattled off Kristen's number, he hung up and immediately dialed her house.

"Hello?"

"Kristen? This is Chief Van Alstyne. Did you call Reverend Fergusson earlier today and ask her to meet you and your mother at a cousin's cabin near Tenant Mountain?"

There was a blank pause. "What? I haven't spoken with Clare since the day before yesterday. What's going on?"

The unease Russ had been fending off jelled into a solid icy mass of dread. "I'll get back to you."

He dropped the receiver into its cradle, tore the yellow carbon sheet out of the memorandum book, and left the church office. In his cruiser, he radioed Harlene while firing the engine up and maneuvering out of the tiny parking area.

"Harlene, somebody pretending to be Kristen McWhorter conned Reverend Fergusson into driving up into the mountains." Squinting at the yellow sheet, he read the directions to Harlene. "I'm heading after her. I'm inbound to the station, gonna switch this cruiser for my truck. She'll handle the roads up there better."

"Do you want me to send backup along?"

"No. We're going to be shorthanded as it is. I can handle this."

He pulled into the station's parking lot as he hung up his mike. His truck was parked in the rear. He killed the cruiser's engine, got out, unlocked the trunk. From its locked safety box he removed the rifle and a box of shells, then laid it and the ammunition in the back seat of the pickup before starting it up. The engine roared to life reassuringly, warming up fast as Russ rolled out of the lot.

He made good time, considering the heavy traffic on Route 9. The driving was trickier once he had turned onto Tenant Mountain Road. His windshield wipers beat away steadily at the spitting snow. The sound made him think of Wednesday night, driving through the last storm, Clare in the passenger seat, exhausted and weeping. Paying attention to everyone's feelings except her own.

He passed a mom-and-pop store. Once its lights had dwindled in his mirror, there was nothing except rising country and snow. At the

mountain road he turned and checked the trip odometer against the numbers on the directions. He ought to be getting close.

The unmistakable sound of a shot made him slam on his brakes, sending the truck into a skidding stop. He rolled down his window and thrust his head through it, straining to hear any other noise through the darkness.

CHAPTER TEN

THE slithery hissing of dry snow meeting snow. Everything else was silence. Russ opened the glove compartment and removed his flashlight. Reaching into the back seat, he retrieved the box of shells and the rifle. He poured a handful of shells into his coat pocket before tugging on his hat and gloves and stepping out of the cab.

He hesitated at the edge of the trees. The thought of walking toward an unknown shooter while shining a light made him nervous. But if Clare couldn't see him, he could search for a week without stumbling over her. He cradled the rifle and thumbed his flashlight on. What the hell. Either the shooter wasn't interested or he was going to get drilled.

He waded into the forest, sweeping his light around in 180-degree arcs. The cold pinched at his face. A hundred paces into the trees he angled back toward the road. If someone had been shooting, Clare must be around here. That shot had been close. He tried not to picture her lying in a heap, her blood staining the snow red.

He angled again, away from the road, pushing through pines and hemlocks. A long zigzag pattern, working his way downhill because that's the direction most lost folks take.

The flashlight beam hit him straight in the eyes, blinding him. He dropped into the snow and sighted his rifle toward the other light.

"Russ?" Her voice was weak and cracking from the cold.

"Clare?" He scrambled back to his feet, swinging his flashlight in

her direction. "Oh, my God. Clare." She staggered toward him. He crossed the distance first, catching her in his arms. "Clare, are you all right? Were you hit?"

"My feet . . . I can't feel my feet anymore."

He released her to shine the light over her again. Her face was raw—chapped and scratched. Her pants were wet up to her thighs, and chunks of ice were frozen to her flimsy boots.

"What are you doing with hunting boots hung over your shoulder?" She opened her mouth. "No, don't tell me now. My truck's about seventy yards away. I can carry you, but I think we'll be faster if you can walk."

She nodded. "I can walk," she said.

He looked around them. "The shooter, is he close? Did you get a look at him?"

She shook her head. "I couldn't see his face. I don't know if he's close by. But he lost his gun when I took him out."

He held her arm. "You took him out? What do you mean?"

She clutched at his arm but otherwise walked steadily. "I knocked him down with a sapling tree and bashed him with a rock. I couldn't find his gun, but I took his flashlight and his boots." She gulped air. "I was working my way back to the road. But I was going the other way when I saw your light, Russ. I was going the wrong way." Her voice cracked. "I would have— I would have just kept on walking."

Up ahead he could see his truck. "C'mon. Let me take you up." He picked her off the ground and settled her against his shoulder. At the truck, he opened the passenger door and helped her in. Climbing into the driver's side, he fired up the engine and turned on the dome light before rummaging in the back for his two spare blankets. "Okay, darlin'. Let's get your wet things off."

She nodded jerkily. She pulled off her gloves, but she couldn't manage the snap and zipper at her neck. "My fingers," she said.

He nodded. "We need to take a look at your feet first, anyway." He lifted her stiff, ice-encrusted boots into his lap. "What the hell did you do to get these so wet?"

"I ran through a stream. Only fast way to get to the spot I picked

to ambush him." She shivered violently as he gently wiggled each boot off. "I'm so cold."

He adjusted the vents to blow on her, then carefully peeled away her socks, sucking in his breath at the sight of the blotchy white patches mottling bluish skin. "Oh, darlin'," he said.

"Is it bad?" He looked at her. "Tell me the truth, Russ."

"It doesn't look like frostbite, but we're going to have to soak your feet in cool water and bring 'em up to temperature slowly. Here, let's get those pants off you." He tried to be gentle, but he had to tug and wrestle the stiff, wet khaki off her, each twist causing her to gasp. The skin on her legs was alarmingly cold and pale, but there were no signs of frostbite there, either. He cocooned her feet and legs in one of the blankets while he went to work on the parka, unbuttoning and unzipping. Underneath, her woolly turtleneck was dry. He wrapped the second blanket around her, chafed her hands between his own. "Can you feel this?" He ran his fingertips lightly down her fingers and across one palm.

She looked at him. Her eyes were huge and dark. Her fingers flexed over his. "Yes," she whispered. He opened his mouth to speak, then shut it again. She raised her free hand as if she would touch his cheek, then let it fall. "I'm so glad you're here," she said. "I was such a jerk last night. I'm sorry. You were right. You were right about everything."

He smiled at her. "I wasn't right about everything. Ballistics came back negative on their gun." He squeezed her hands hard. "I was right about one thing, though. This isn't any business of yours. Dammit, Clare, you could have died out there!"

She smiled waveringly. "Not me. I'm too smart."

He released her hands, then reached around her and buckled her in. "Let's get you someplace warm, smart girl."

The truck strained and groaned before turning slowly back down the road. "What about the man who attacked me?" Clare asked.

Russ kept his attention on the road. "What about him?"

"Aren't you going to try to find him?"

"I could turn out the National Guard, and we'd still never find

him in this weather. My first priority is to get you thawed out. We can be at the Glens Falls Hospital in half an hour if the county's gotten the plows out."

"No. No hospital. I don't like hospitals."

"You go to hospitals all the time, for God's sake!"

"Not for myself!" She had an edge of hysteria to her voice. "Just take me home, Russ," she said. "Please."

THEY didn't talk much on the ride back to Millers Kill. Clare leaned back, exhausted, her mouth thinning occasionally when they went over a bump. He glanced over at her. Knocked him down with a tree and bashed him with a rock. Damn. He smiled a little.

When they pulled into her driveway, he said, "Keys?"

"I left them in my car. But don't worry, it's—"

"Unlocked. Of course." She didn't argue when he opened her door and picked her up to carry her inside.

In the living room, he deposited her blanket-wrapped form on the sofa and cranked up the thermostat. "Okay," he said. "You need dry clothes, a tub of water to soak those feet in, and something warm to drink. Not coffee. The caffeine's bad for your circulation."

"Hot cocoa?"

"That's fine. Where can I find stuff?"

She gave him directions. In her bedroom he grabbed her army sweats and dropped them next to her on the sofa before hitting the kitchen to find the cocoa ingredients. He put the milk on to heat and rummaged beneath the sink for a plastic tub, which he filled with lukewarm water. He walked in with it slowly. "Stick your feet in there," he said, settling the tub in front of the sofa. She pulled the legs of her sweatpants up a bit and complied.

He returned to the kitchen, then came back out carrying two mugs. "Here you go." He put the mugs on the coffee table. "Now, who can I call to come and stay with you tonight?"

"Russ! I couldn't impose on anyone like that."

"Someone put a lot of effort into killing you tonight. Let's not make it easier for him to take a second crack at you."

"All right. But I don't know anyone well enough to ask over."

"You're exhausted, and you can barely walk. You think of someone you can 'impose' on, or I'll station one of my officers here."

Her face melted into a look of concern. She gnawed on her lower lip again. "Dr. Anne," she said finally. "Anne Vining-Ellis. She lives a couple blocks away."

"I'll give her a call." There was a cordless phone on the table behind the sofa. He called information and punched in the number. When she answered, he sketched out the situation.

Dr. Anne was horrified at the story of her priest's ordeal. "Of course I'll come over and stay with her," she said. "It's absolutely no trouble at all. I'll bring my kit and give her a going-over, too, just to make sure she doesn't need to be admitted to the hospital."

He thanked her and rang off. "Dr. Anne's on her way over," he announced, then stuck his hand into the water Clare's feet were soaking in. Cooling. "So you wanna tell me about what happened?" He headed into the kitchen for water.

"Master Sergeant Ashley 'Hardball' Wright saved my sorry ass," she called after him.

He emerged with a teakettle. "I thought I saved your sorry ass!"

She smiled faintly. "You helped. You surely did help." She sipped her hot cocoa while he poured water into the tub. "How on earth did you know I was out there?"

He told her about finding the paper trail and calling Kristen.

"So she didn't have anything to do with it. Well, I didn't think so, not after that guy took a shot at me." She closed her eyes. "Although before that, when I drove my car over a cliff, I had my doubts. Maybe she was just really bad at directions."

"You drove your car over a cliff?"

"Well, maybe it wasn't quite a cliff. A big gorge. My car is totaled." She compressed her lips. "I loved that car."

"You have any idea who could have been behind this?"

"How about this? This morning I found out that Katie's secret lover was Wesley Fowler. His family are members of the congregation and about as far from the McWhorters as you can get."

"How the hell did you get that piece of information?"

She told him about her visit to the Infirmary and the photograph. "I visited the Fowlers to see if they knew anything about it, which they didn't. Then I went to Albany."

"Albany?"

"I wanted to see if Katie's roommates might recognize Wesley's picture. I brought his yearbook." She twisted on the sofa to face him. "Anyway, no one recognized Wes. But then, just by chance, they spotted a picture of Alyson Shattham. And guess what? She had been to see Katie last September. They had a fight."

"Huh. Alyson said she hadn't seen Katie since graduation."

"Guess who Alyson's boyfriend was all last year."

"Wesley Fowler." He smiled. "Where is this kid? Still in town?"

"No. He's a plebe at West Point. His father's gone down to bring him back, though. They should be here tomorrow."

"Alyson and Wes," he said, perching on the edge of an overstuffed armchair. "Did Alyson know Wes was seeing Katie on the side? Maybe she wouldn't put out and Katie would? So she let Katie keep Wesley-boy happy?"

"There's no doubt that Katie did, as you oh-so-tastefully phrased it, put out. But honestly, I can't see Alyson Shattham standing by while her boyfriend gets . . . serviced."

"Yeah, I agree. It's more likely Alyson didn't know that Katie was sleeping with Wes."

"But then he gets her pregnant. Could he have come running to Alyson then? I'm willing to bet a nonpregnant girlfriend suddenly looked a lot more appealing to him."

"Okay. Let's say he did tell her. What do the king and queen of the prom do when he's gotten another girl knocked up?"

"They make the problem disappear?"

"Let's say Wesley persuades Katie to give away the baby."

"That could explain Alyson's visit to Albany. Maybe she was the go-between, trying to talk Katie into it."

"But a few days after leaving the baby, Katie gets back in touch with Wesley. She says she wants the baby back."

"I don't think Wes Fowler would have been too keen to have it come out that he got a girl from Depot Street pregnant and then abandoned the baby outside St. Alban's. The West Point ethics commission takes a dim view of that sort of thing."

Russ snorted.

"So one of them decides to stop Katie before she can tell anyone. One of them gets her out by the kill and cracks her head open and leaves her there to die."

"But then another problem rears its ugly head," he said. "Darrell, who evidently once saw Katie and Wes together. We know he called somebody. Maybe he was putting the squeeze on Wesley, and the kid hightailed it back to town and put a bullet through Darrell's slimy little brain."

"Or Alyson did."

"But what about the guy in Albany who said he was Katie's father? The roommate described him as older, with a mustache."

"Dr. Anne told me Wes Fowler was in the Millers Kill High School Drama Society. A little gray tint in his hair, a fake mustache—it might been enough to fool a couple of freshmen who had had a few too many beers."

Russ got up and poured more water into the tub.

She flexed her toes. "If he did kill Darrell and clean out Katie's room, he must have thought he had covered all the bases. There wasn't anything to link him to Katie except Cody himself."

"Nothing, until the Reverend Fergusson saw a photo of the two of them together and rushed over to confront his proud parents."

"Would he have had time to get from West Point to here and set up that ambush for me?"

He nodded slowly. "I don't see why not. It's a three-hour drive at most, another hour to get himself parked on a camp road on Tenant Mountain. All he needed was a way to get you up to that mountain and someone pretending to be Kristen McWhorter."

"Which brings us back to Alyson."

The doorbell chimed. He headed for the kitchen to admit a snow-dusted Dr. Anne.

"How is she?" she asked, unwinding a scarf from her neck.

"I've got her soaking in a tub of lukewarm water." The doctor stared at him. "I mean, her feet. She's soaking her feet. In there." He led Dr. Anne into the living room, where she dropped her medical bag on the sofa and glanced at Russ. "Anything in particular I need to watch out for?"

"You see anything or hear anything that makes you feel uneasy, call the station. No, give me a call." He scrawled his home number on the scratch pad next to the cordless phone base.

He looked down at Clare. She smiled crookedly. "Thank you. It seems inadequate, but thank you."

He crossed his arms over his chest. "I'll see you tomorrow. Try not to get into any trouble until then, okay?"

CLARE looked out at her congregation and wondered if one of the people looking back at her wanted her dead. Alyson Shattham and her mother were in their usual spots, but the Fowlers were missing, as were the Burnses. Dr. Anne, who last night had argued strenuously against her celebrating the nine-o'clock Eucharist, was frowning in concern.

Clare glanced at the post-communion prayer and took a deep, slow breath. "Almighty God," she began, "we thank You for giving us the most precious body and blood of your son, Jesus Christ."

The torchbearers and the crucifier assembled in front of the altar to begin the recessional. Clare glanced up from her hymnal just in time to see the inner vestibule door opening at the end of the church. Russ Van Alstyne slipped inside. Across the length of the nave, his eyes met hers.

She joined the recessional, last in line, inadvertently wincing at the ache that intensified every time she put a foot down.

"What are you doing here?" she hissed at Russ when she reached the door.

"I'm going to talk to Alyson," he said. "How do your feet feel?"

"They hurt. But not enough to miss the Eucharist. Why here?"

"Because I want her comfortable enough to talk, of course. You'd

be amazed at how many people clam up and call for a lawyer when you haul 'em into the station for questioning."

"I have to do the receiving line," Clare said. "I want to be there when you talk to her."

"I figured you would."

She pasted on a pleasant expression, shaking hands, thanking those who offered to volunteer for the Christmas preparations, all the while watching as Russ intercepted Alyson and her mother in their pew and spoke with them. When he stepped back, both the Shatthams collected their things and followed him up the side aisle toward the parish hall.

Clare had no idea there were so many people in her congregation. She felt as if she had shaken five hundred hands before the last of them left the vestibule and she could painfully stump her way up the aisle and into the meeting room.

Russ was sitting with his back to the window. Alyson slouched in a chair opposite him, twisting a strand of hair around two fingers.

Clare shut the door. "Good morning, Alyson, Mrs. Shattham."

"Reverend Clare," Barbara Shattham said.

Russ rose and ceremoniously pulled out a chair. Clare cocked an eyebrow at him. "I know your feet must be hurting you after your ordeal last night," he said.

"Ah." She got it. "Yes, thank you." She hobbled more obviously toward the table and sat down.

"Where's your husband, Mrs. Shattham?"

"At home. He's not feeling well. Now what's this all about?"

Russ looked at Clare. She bit her lip. "Yesterday evening there was a phone message waiting for me when I got back from Albany. I believe you knew I was going to Albany, Mrs. Shattham."

Barbara Shattham blinked, then nodded.

"And you told Alyson about what had happened at the Fowlers'. That I discovered Wes and Katie McWhorter had been dating."

"Yes, I did. It concerned her, after all."

Clare looked directly at Alyson. "But you weren't surprised, were you? You already knew about him and Katie."

Alyson's fingers twitched at her hair. "No, I didn't."

"Katie has two roommates who have identified you from photographs as having visited her." Russ's voice was calm. "Now, we can have them come up for a lineup—"

"A lineup? You mean as in arresting my daughter?"

Alyson's mouth dropped open.

"She could do the lineup voluntarily, or she could do it after we've arrested her." He stared at the girl. "Or she could tell us what she knows right here."

"I didn't do anything! Mummy, honestly, I didn't hurt anyone!" Her blue eyes swam soft and liquid with tears.

Russ rose for a moment. "Alyson Shattham, I'm placing you—"

Alyson squealed. "Okay, I did know Wes was hanging around with Katie. I didn't have anything to do with what happened to her, okay? I only went down to Albany to tell her to lay off because it was, like, time for the fling to be over." She turned to her mother. "I mean, can you really see some girl from Depot Street going with Wes to the Academy Ball?"

"Where were you yesterday evening, Alyson?" Russ asked.

Mrs. Shattham frowned. "She was at home."

"Did she receive any phone calls?"

"Are you kidding? Of course she did. If Mitch and I didn't have our own line, we'd never be able to use the phone."

Russ removed a small notepad from his pocket. "Can you give me her number, please?"

"Why?"

"It'll make things go faster when we contact the phone company for a record of all her outgoing calls."

Clare watched Alyson. She had never seen anyone actually go white before. "Last night," Clare said, "a young woman claiming to be Kristen McWhorter called the church and left an urgent message for me to join her." She looked steadily at Alyson. "This young woman left directions for me to drive. They led to a washed-out road crossing a gorge. My car went in. I was fortunate to walk away. My car was totaled."

"Dear God," Barbara Shattham said. "Are you suggesting my daughter had a hand in this?"

Alyson's gaze darted between Clare and Russ.

"I was stranded on Tenant Mountain with no vehicle and no cold-weather gear," Clare went on. "But that wasn't the worst. The worst was when a man began shooting at me."

Barbara Shattham stood abruptly. "She's not saying anything else until we see our attorney."

Russ leaned back, crossing his arms. "Well, that's certainly your right, ma'am. But let me make my position clear. Katie McWhorter and her father are both dead. Your daughter was seen arguing with Katie, who was poaching on her territory with Wes Fowler. And when Reverend Clare found out about Katie and Wes, I believe your daughter sent her off on a wild-goose chase designed to get her killed." He pinned Alyson with a level stare. "Either you give up a better suspect, Alyson, or I'll arrest you on two counts of murder and one of attempted murder."

The girl let out a nasal whine. "It wasn't me!" She reached toward Russ. "Wes sent me an e-mail yesterday afternoon. Asked me to call and say I was Kristen. He was all sweet, said it was just, like, a joke, because the Reverend had been poking around. I didn't know anyone was going to be hurt. I swear! I should have known he was yanking my chain. He's been, like, thanks but no thanks ever since he started sneaking around with that bitch."

Barbara Shattham sat down heavily.

"Alyson," Clare said, "what about Katie?"

"I didn't have anything to do with that. And Wes didn't say anything to me. Except for a family get-together around Thanksgiving, he hasn't said a word to me since he left for the Academy."

"When was the last time you saw Katie?" Russ asked.

"When I went to her house in Albany that time. I didn't know she was pregnant, I swear."

"Did Wesley ever indicate that he was troubled about his relationship with Katie?"

"He was weirding out before he went away to the Academy, but

when I tried to talk with him, he blew me off. I had already figured it out, him and her, so he goes, 'Just don't tell anyone.' That's why I went to see her."

Russ nodded slowly. "Thank you, Alyson. Mrs. Shattham, I suggest Alyson stay close to home. She knows something about Katie and Wesley. Just like Clare and Darrell McWhorter did."

Barbara Shattham clutched her daughter's sleeve. "Dear God."

Russ pinched the bridge of his nose beneath his glasses. "I'm not going to arrest her now. I may not ever arrest her. I will," he stressed, "take any attempt to get in touch with Wes Fowler as a sign that she's actively assisting him."

After the Shatthams left in a swirl of silky hair and tearful glares, Russ frowned. "What do you think? Was she telling the truth?"

"I don't know. She sure sounded peeved at Wesley, though."

"Yeah. That shoots my boy-and-girl-did-it-together theory."

"Vaughn Fowler should be back home with Wesley by now."

"That's assuming he wasn't already back home last night, trying to shoot you." Through the door they could hear the sounds of coffee hour. "You probably have to go join your flock."

"Oh, no. At this point I may as well bow out entirely and come with you to see the Fowlers. Give me ten minutes to change out of my vestments and say good-bye."

He looked at the ceiling. "Why don't I just deputize you and issue you a gun while I'm at it?"

Clare rose from the table. "No, thanks. But if there's a paying position as departmental chaplain, I'll take that. I'm going to need some extra money if I ever hope to replace my car."

IT WAS a short drive from St. Alban's to the Fowlers'. As Russ pulled into the neatly plowed gravel drive, Clare recognized the Fowlers' Explorer. There was also a brand-new Jeep Wrangler parked in front of the barn. "That must be Wesley's truck."

Edith Fowler opened the door. Her deep-set eyes showed stark and white in her narrow face.

"Mrs. Fowler? I'm Chief Van Alstyne. May I come in?"

Her face relaxed. "Certainly, Chief. Reverend Clare, I'm glad to see you here as well." In the foyer she took their coats. "I'm sorry we missed church this morning, but it's been . . . well . . ." She gestured down the hall. "They're in the family room."

Clare was glad she hadn't changed into civvies. Her collar and long black skirt created a shield dividing the woman who had slogged through an icy stream from the priest who was here to counsel and support.

In the family room the Fowler men were rising from a cluster of leather-covered love seats and chairs.

"Chief Van Alstyne." Vaughn Fowler didn't sound surprised to see an officer in his home on a Sunday morning.

Wesley looked startlingly like his father: same strong features, same heavily muscled build, same military clip. His face was strained and weary.

"This is my son, Wesley."

"Sir." Wesley pumped Russ's hand.

Vaughn waved Clare over. "Wes, I don't think you've met our new priest yet. This is the Reverend Clare Fergusson."

"Ma'am." Clare and Wesley shook hands. He was definitely discomfited to see her. Was it because she was the one who had brought his connection to Katie out in the open? Or because she had brained him with a rock last night?

"Let's all sit down." Vaughn was looking the worse for wear, too. As the men took their seats, she wondered if his control of the situation was what was keeping him together. "Wes has something to say to you, Chief."

The young man stood. "Sir, I was Katie's boyfriend. I am the baby's father. There's no need to do a blood test. I'm responsible."

Russ said, "Sit down, Wes. You're not on report." The boy sat, spine held straight. "So you're Cody's father. Were you with her when she had the baby?"

"Yes, sir. It was just after Thanksgiving. I told my folks I was spending a few days with a friend. I took Katie to the Sleeping Hollow Motel, and she had the baby there."

"What happened after Katie gave birth?" Clare said.

"We waited a day to make sure he was, you know, okay. Then we left him on the steps at St. Alban's."

She leaned forward. "Why?"

He glanced at her. "Ma'am, we agreed to give the baby up. We thought— I thought, with the Burnses looking to adopt for so long, that it would be easy. I didn't know the police would get involved!" He caught his breath. "I just found out last week she had been killed. Alyson called me." Clare noticed a distinct lack of warmth when he mentioned his official girlfriend's name.

Wesley drew a deep breath. "I didn't kill Katie or her father. I—" His voice broke. "I cared for her very much. I want to do the right thing. I'm ready to take care of the baby, to be his father. I've discussed it with my folks."

"That's a very stirring sentiment from a boy facing a double-murder rap," Russ said.

Vaughn laid a hand on Wesley's shoulder. "My son has said he had nothing to do with the murders, and I believe him."

Russ shook his head. "No offense, Mr. Fowler, but your son has already lied through omission about a lot of things." He turned to Wesley. "The way I see it, you were desperate to keep the existence of Katie and Cody under wraps. My guess is, sometime between the night you dropped Cody off at the church and the night Katie's body was found, she got in touch with you and said she had changed her mind." The young man's face flinched almost imperceptibly. "So you told her to meet you back in Millers Kill, drove her out to Payson's Park to discuss things, brained her with a tire iron, and rolled her down the hill into the river."

"No!"

"This is what we're going to do," Russ said, standing slowly. "Wesley, you and I are going to the station, where we'll have a talk with Mr. Kaminsky of the D.A.'s office. If we decide we have enough to hold you on, we're going to charge you." Russ's gaze flicked from the young man's pale face to that of his father. "Mr. Fowler, I suggest you call your lawyer and meet us at the station."

Vaughn looked at his son for a long moment. "You go with him, Wes. It'll be for the best. We'll get a lawyer over there and have you back out by dinnertime."

"Let's get your coat, Wesley." Russ stepped out of the way, keeping behind and to the side of the young man.

From the hallway, Mrs. Fowler wailed. Vaughn Fowler strode toward the sound.

"No, no, no," Wesley's mother said, clutching at her parka-clad son. "You can't take him! You can't take him!"

"Edith!" Vaughn Fowler grasped her upper arms firmly and tugged her away from Wesley. "I'm calling the lawyer right now. Wes will be back home with us tonight."

"Mom, I'll be okay. Please."

Clare got her coat from the hall closet.

"Don't say anything until our lawyer gets there, Wes. Understand me?" Wesley nodded to his father as Russ led him down the steps toward the squad car.

Clare stood on the threshold, miserably aware of how much she had contributed to these people's unhappiness.

Edith Fowler wiped her eyes. "This whole thing is like a nightmare." She looked at her husband. "My God, Vaughn, do you realize we're grandparents?"

"I guess you're right." His face tightened. "Clare, will we be able to see the child? Where is he?"

"I don't know what sort of requirements the Department of Human Services will have, but his caseworker's name is Angela Dunkling, and right now he's fostering with Deborah McDonald, out toward Fort Henry." Behind her Russ tapped on the horn. She retreated down the steps. "I'll call you with their numbers."

She tugged on the car door, and Russ leaned over to let her in. Sliding into her seat, she glanced through the clear Plexiglas screen at Wesley in the back. He met her eyes, bleak and hopeless. She had wanted to feel a sense of triumph when they caught up with Katie's killer. Instead, she felt an ache in the pit of her stomach. So much damage. To so many lives. And it wasn't over yet.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

AT THE station, Russ escorted Wesley into the interrogation room and latched the door. "I'm going to make a pot of coffee," he said to Clare. "I don't know about you, but I could use a cup."

"Please. What happens now?"

"I already talked with the D.A. last night, so he'll be expecting my call. He's going to be here to listen to the questioning."

Clare asked, "Can I speak with Wesley now? As priest to parishioner? I want to help him. He's obviously very troubled."

"He's very troubled because he carefully planned and executed two cold-blooded murders."

"I'm not making excuses for anything he may have done." She crossed her arms. "No one is beyond forgiveness, Russ, or beyond asking for forgiveness. I have to believe that."

Russ frowned. "I don't even know why you're here. After this I want you to take my truck and go home." He rapped on the door to the interrogation room. "Wesley? Reverend Clare here would like to speak with you as your"—he glanced at Clare—"spiritual adviser. You want to talk with her?"

There was a pause. "I guess so. Okay."

Russ unlatched the door. "There's an alarm buzzer on the wall. If he makes any moves on you, use it."

Clare nodded. Wesley was standing at the far end of the room, his back against the wall, his eyes suspicious. She sat down at the worn wooden table and propped her chin in her hand. "I'm the one who found Cody, you know."

Wesley looked at his boots. "Yeah, I know. My dad says you've been working hard to see that the Burnses get to adopt him."

She nodded. "You could help with that. As his father, you can authorize a legal adoption just by signing over the papers."

"I didn't mean to have them wait. We just— It was easier to not think about it. We never exactly planned any of it."

"What about the motel? The fake ID? That must have taken some planning."

"I already had a fake ID so I could, um, get into bars." He looked at the wall opposite him. "I met her at her school—she had her roommate's car—and we stopped at the first place that was open. We weren't even sure if she was going to have the baby then. She'd been having those fake contractions."

"Why did you leave the baby at the church instead of at the Burnses' house?"

"They weren't home when we drove by. Then I remembered my parents talking about the reception for the new priest that night. We figured somebody would find the baby and read the note and hand him over to the Burnses." He dropped into a chair. "What we're talking about here, you can't tell that to anyone, right?"

"What we say here is just between you and me and God."

"I didn't do it, Reverend. I didn't kill her. Or her rotten father. I don't know who could have done it. She was so— She was so special. She didn't like me because of my family or my car. She didn't care if I got into student council or West Point. She liked me because of who I was, not who I was supposed to be. You know? I didn't want to have a baby. And I didn't want to get married. But it wasn't her. It was just— It was too soon. You know what I mean?"

"Yes."

"And I don't think she really wanted to get married and keep the baby, either. She sent me a long e-mail afterward about how she did, but I don't think she had thought it out. My dad said hormones can make a woman kind of crazy and if I just let it be for a while, she'd realize that rushing into marriage would be a bad idea."

"Your dad said that?"

"Yeah. But I figured if she really couldn't stand not having the baby, I could transfer to SUNY Albany. Go for a business degree so I could support them as soon as I graduated. But I wanted to talk about it with Dad before I suggested it to Katie."

"You offered to leave West Point? You spoke with your father before Katie was killed?"

"Yeah. I didn't want to let him know how bad I screwed up, but I had to. If we had taken Cody back and gotten married, Katie would have had to drop out. That would have been a total waste. She was so smart." Wesley buried his face in his hands.

Clare held her breath for a moment. "Wes? This is going to sound strange, but can I touch the back of your head?"

He looked at her as if she had lost her mind. "Uh . . . this isn't some sort of faith-healing thing, is it?"

"No." She rose partway from her chair. "May I?"

He shrugged. "Sure."

She ran her hand lightly over the back of his skull, then pressed more firmly. Nothing. No bump, no swelling. She sank back into her chair. "You weren't out in the woods last night trying to kill me."

He reared back. "Are you crazy? Of course I wasn't out trying to kill you. I was in my dorm room, studying."

"What time did your dad pick you up to bring you home?"

"Early this morning. There must have been a dozen guys who saw me last night. You can ask them. I'm not a killer!"

"Anyone can be a killer, Wes. All it takes is the right training. And enough motivation." Clare blew out her breath. "Could your father access your e-mail account?"

"Huh? Not my account at the Academy, but he could send stuff from my old address at home."

Clare stood. "Your father," she said. She looked down at the young man. His face was a mask of absolute denial. "Your father is so proud of you. What wouldn't he do to protect you from 'ruining your life' with some white-trash girl and her baby?"

"No," he said.

"He must have e-mailed her and invited her to Millers Kill. Maybe he tried to bribe her into forgetting about you and Cody. But that didn't work. So he got rid of the problem another way."

"No!"

She paced around the table, talking as much to herself as to Wes-

ley. "We assumed that Darrell McWhorter threatened to blackmail Cody's father. But why go to a kid in college when you can tap into so much more money from his dad?" She leaned over the table. "He saw you two together, didn't he? Darrell."

Wesley hesitated, then nodded. "I drove her home from the library late once. He was just getting back from a bar and got a real good look at me. Katie said he asked her a lot of questions about me, but she convinced him I was just a guy in her study group."

"Darrell was smarter than any of us gave him credit for. As soon as he saw your family photo on the parish bulletin board, he put all the pieces together. When he called your father, they must have agreed to ride down to Albany to get any incriminating stuff left in Katie's room. And when your father saw his chance to get rid of Darrell, he acted quickly and decisively." She straightened. "Wesley, your father's been methodically removing every person who might interfere with you becoming the fifth generation of Fowlers to graduate from West Point."

"But if my dad's willing to do anything to protect me, why wouldn't he confess instead of letting the cops cart me off to jail?"

Clare blew out a frustrated breath. "You're right. It doesn't make sense that—" Her stomach clenched. "Oh, my God. The baby."

"What? What do you mean?"

"The baby, Wes, the baby! The baby who is the root of all his troubles? Oh, holy God, I told him where to find him. I told him." She slammed her palm against the alarm button.

The door rattled, and then Russ was inside the room, crouching low, his gun drilled at Wesley. "Down on the floor! Now!" Wesley fell out of his chair, flat and spread-eagle. "Clare? Are you okay?"

"Yes! I just needed to get out of the room."

"What?" Russ straightened. "What the hell did you mean, setting off an alarm just to get out?"

Clare opened her mouth to tell Russ everything, then shut it again. Priestly confidence. "Give me your truck keys. Now."

"What's—"

"Now, Russ!" He fished his keys out of his pocket.

"I'm going to Deborah McDonald's house out near the intersection of old Route 100." She jabbed a finger at Wesley. "You! Tell the chief everything!" She ran out the door before Russ could stop her.

After her speedy little MG, driving Russ's pickup felt like piloting a C1-30 Hercules transport down the runway. As soon as she hit the town limits, she tromped on the accelerator. Maybe she was wrong and she'd find the baby napping peacefully. Maybe Wesley's father was too busy rousting out a lawyer on a Sunday afternoon to think of Cody. Maybe.

Just past the turnoff from old Route 100, she went over the ridge and around the corner way too fast and would have hit an Explorer heading up the hill if it hadn't slid into the shoulder. Its horn blared as she went past, her heart beating out of her chest. Everything looked peaceful in the McDonalds' yard as she pulled in.

As she jumped down from the truck, the front door flew open to reveal Deborah McDonald. "Oh, my goodness," Deborah said. "Do you know where he's gone?"

Clare's skin prickled. "What's happened, Mrs. McDonald?"

"I just had a visit from Cody's grandfather. At least, he said he was Cody's grandfather. He was with the baby while I went to get some pictures, and when I came back, they were gone!"

"You need to call the police. Tell them Vaughn Fowler has the baby. What was he driving?"

"A big blue sport-utility truck."

The Explorer! "Tell them he's in a dark blue Ford Explorer. I passed him on the curve before this. I didn't notice the driver." She swung around to dash down the steps again.

"Wait! Where are you going? Where did he take Cody?"

Clare closed her eyes. *Where?* She pressed her fingers to her forehead. *When you are threatened and on the run, you will tend to return to the same base of operations,* Hardball Wright drawled. *If not to the same spot, then to the same sort of terrain. Remember that. The enemy will.* She opened her eyes. "I think he's headed for the river. The trail from Payson's Park or the old railroad bridge. I'm going to head there. Let the police know."

TRAFFIC THROUGH THE NORTH end of town was agonizingly slow, but she didn't know any other way toward where she and Russ had discovered Katie's body. She swung onto the Cossayaharie Road, Route 137, driving carefully, then turned the truck into the newly plowed entrance to the park. Leaving the truck running, she jumped from the cab and ran to the edge of the parking lot. The trail leading down to the kill was unbroken by footprints or tire tracks. Could she be wrong about where Fowler was headed?

She climbed back into the truck and breathed deeply to calm herself. Every place Fowler had killed or tried to kill had been isolated, a place where a body could disappear for hours. Her instructor from survival school had been right. Fowler was returning to the same sort of terrain. She had to try the abandoned railroad bridge.

She swung the pickup around, turning left when she reached the road. Where was she going to find the thing? Russ had told her it was a half-mile upstream from the trail, but that didn't necessarily translate into a half-mile drive up the road. There must have been train tracks leading straight toward the river, but where were they?

Ahead of her, high-voltage lines crossed Route 137, sparking memories of the times she had navigated small planes by following the clearly visible paths maintained by electric companies. Metal transmission towers marched in a receding line over a gentle rise that led, if she wasn't mistaken, toward the river. She couldn't see any train tracks under the snow, but there were marks of snowmobiles crisscrossing beneath the towers and, ahead of her, tire tracks along what must be the electric company's access road.

She engaged the four-wheel drive, downshifted, and rolled onto the snow, following the tracks as closely as possible. As she crested the rise, it struck her that none of the squad cars would be able to follow her without four-wheel drive. She refused to think about the possibility that the police might not be following her at all.

The tire tracks curved gently to the left. As she rounded the bend, the landscape opened startlingly before her: blue sky, white snow, black water, green bridge. Dark blue Ford Explorer.

She slammed on the brakes and almost fell from the cab in her frantic need to get out. She could see him, halfway along the span of the bridge, bundled up against the cold, carrying something.

"Mr. Fowler!" she screamed. Running through the snow was like running in a nightmare, slipping and dragging. "Stop!"

He did. She staggered onto the rails. She saw why he had been walking so slowly: The train track was supported on a huge trestle but open to the air. She stood on the half-foot-wide wooden ties.

Vaughn Fowler was facing her now, cradling a blanket-wrapped bundle with one arm. "I can't say I'm surprised to see you, Reverend," he said, his voice carrying clearly. "As a member of the vestry, I'm disappointed in your performance so far. Way too much time spent on a situation that is out of your area of concern."

She heard nothing from inside the blanket. Shouldn't the baby be crying after all this? "My area of concern is the people around me. The McWhorters. The Burnses." She picked her way along the crossbars, moving closer. "Your son. Your grandson. You." She looked steadily at Fowler. "Let me help you."

"Very comforting, coming from a woman who tried to kill me last night." He held out a hand. "Stop there, Reverend."

She stopped, her arms spread for balance. Beneath her feet she could see the kill, black and glittering in the pale sunlight. "Are you going to try to shoot me again?" she asked.

Fowler laughed. "Hardly. I lost my side arm when you ambushed me. I'm lucky to have survived with my feet intact."

"I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you—"

"You meant to hurt me, and you did. I underestimated you, and I paid the price. Don't apologize for being successful."

"No, sir." She sure wasn't going to reach him by appealing to him as a priest, but maybe she could engage him officer to officer. "I thought taking your boots and flashlight to keep you from reaching your vehicle was good strategy, but obviously it didn't work."

"I had a penlight in my snowmobile suit. As soon as I'd assessed the situation, I headed straight for my snowmobile."

"But . . . your feet . . ."

"I was wearing insulated hunting socks. Next time you try to cripple someone, make sure you leave him with bare feet. Better still, just split his head open."

"Sir, my objective was to slow you down, not to kill you."

"Stupid objective. The only way to deal with an enemy is to take him out. Otherwise he'll jump back up and bite you in the ass."

"Like Darrell McWhorter?"

His face crinkled in disgust. "Slimy bastard. Called me up and said he'd tell the cops about Wesley and his daughter if I didn't pay him off. Ten thousand dollars. He thought Wes had killed her, and he was still willing to overlook it for money."

"How did you persuade him to come with you to Albany, sir?"

"I told him I'd pay if he'd collect any telltale evidence from the girl's apartment and hand it over. I planned on getting rid of him in Albany; as it happened, a better opportunity presented itself."

"So that was you who rifled through Katie's things."

He tucked his head in assent. "With some of last year's Halloween costume stuck to my face. Crude but effective."

From below, Clare could hear the flat lapping of the river. She glanced at the bundle in Fowler's arm.

"Oh, he's alive. The little bastard fell sound asleep in my truck. Can you believe it?"

"What is it you're looking for here, Colonel?" She let a note of challenge creep into her voice. "Wesley's already off the hook for the murders. What do you hope to accomplish?"

"I'm trying to save my son from himself. You know, I didn't set out to eliminate that girl. If she had just taken the money I offered, she could have paid her way through school and had a nest egg left over! She was too stupid to do what was best for her."

"Some people might say she was too principled to trade money for her child."

"Nonsense. She saw an opportunity to trap a boy from a decent family who could be counted on to earn a good paycheck." He glared at her. "If Wes had quit school to marry her, if he takes on her"—he glanced at the blankets in his arm—"kid, he'll regret it for

the rest of his life. I'm not going to let that happen." His face tightened. "It's up to me to protect him."

"By killing his son and sending his father to prison? Do you really think that's going to protect him?" She stepped toward Fowler. "Wesley's ready to sign the boy over to the Burnses. He told me so himself. You can stop this right here without damaging him any further." She stretched out her arms. "Give me the baby."

From a distance she could hear the sound of a motor. She wanted it to be help. She couldn't do this all by herself.

You aren't all by yourself—the thought came from inside and outside all at once. She breathed in sharply. "Give me the baby, Colonel. Don't burden the rest of Wesley's life with the knowledge that he was the reason you did this terrible thing."

He frowned, pressing his lips together, considering.

Behind them the sound of an engine cut through the air. Fowler looked past her. "Ah, reinforcements," he said. He hefted the blanket-wrapped parcel higher.

Clare couldn't look back. She heard thudding doors and the faint squawk of a walkie-talkie. "They don't change anything," she said. "This is still your call."

"Vaughn." The sound of Russ's voice was like seeing the landing lights at the end of a long night's flight. "How 'bout I walk onto this bridge, and we all try to resolve this situation?"

From within the blanket the baby began to cry. "Stay where you are, Chief, or I toss this into the kill."

"No!" Beneath them Clare heard the motor coming closer.

"You're not going to walk away from this, Vaughn. That's a police boat covering the water. Give the baby to Clare, and let's all get out of the cold. Your son is waiting to see you."

Fowler shook his head. "I didn't plan to walk away from this, Chief. I always knew that I would have to be an acceptable loss."

"No, Colonel." Clare moved forward another shaky step. "Think what you'll be doing to your family."

"I have. Don't you think I considered how this would look? No one appreciates what it is to put your duty to your family first."

In her peripheral vision Clare caught a glimpse of the boat, motoring slowly upstream toward the bridge. Fowler began to unwind the blanket from the wailing infant. She knew, at that moment, he would toss Cody into the kill, no matter what they said or did. She unzipped her parka and peeled it off, then balanced on a single tie, feet together, pressing down on the back of one boot. Her stockinged foot slid free. Her toes curled over the edge of the tie as she lifted her other leg and shook that boot free. It hit one of the ties and fell off her foot. A moment later she heard a splash.

"Give her the baby, Vaughn, and let's get out of here." Russ's voice sounded much closer now.

Vaughn drew a deep breath. "Wes is the fifth generation of my family to attend West Point. Did I tell you that?"

Clare nodded. "Yes, sir, you did."

He looked into her eyes. "It's a good thing to live as a soldier." With a shrug he tossed Cody into the kill.

Clare went over the side before she had a chance to think about it, and then she was under the water, and it was cold—cold beyond any definition of cold. She broke the surface, unable to breathe, the shock of it seizing her lungs. She heard yelling, a motor gunning, shots. She couldn't see Cody. She gulped in air with a sob, went under again. Her body felt like one huge toothache. There was a flash of white ahead, but when she broke surface, it was a clump of snow and ice. Someone was yelling her name. She went under again.

Then she saw him. Floating so near the surface his ice-blue sleeper was dappled with sunlight. She stroked through the water to the tiny form, hauled Cody up with her, holding his head out of the water one-handed. "Here!" she screamed. "I've got him. Here."

When she turned, the boat was there, cutting engines, sliding alongside her. Hands reached out, and she let Cody be whisked out of view. She reached for the side, but she was too weak to hold on. More hands grasped her, and she was hauled in like a fish, someone tossing a thermal blanket over her and rolling her in it. Through the press of parkas, she saw a man half-dressed in diving gear resuscitating Cody, his mouth covering half the baby's face.

"Take us over to the shore so we can pick up the chief; he's going to freeze to death."

"What about the perp's body? Are we fishing him out?"

"Get on that radio to County Hospital, tell 'em we're coming in with possible hypothermias."

Cody's tiny fist jerked in the air. The diver rolled the baby onto his side, and Cody coughed, vomited up a stream of water, and began to cry. Everyone cheered except Clare, who squeezed her eyes shut against hot tears.

The boat bumped and scraped against rock. She opened her eyes in time to see Russ wading through the water. The boat tipped hard to one side as he heaved himself in. "Come back here, Chief," the voice beside her said. "I've got a blanket for you. What the hell were you thinking of? We had them."

Clare focused on the man who had been helping her and recognized Kevin Flynn. The engine kicked in again, pulling them steadily away from the shore.

"Shove over, Kevin," Russ said, his voice thick. The young officer handed him a blanket and carefully shifted down the bench. Russ wrapped himself from the waist down and sat heavily. "Lyle, call the staties, let 'em know we're going to need a diving team and a water search to recover Fowler's body."

"What happened?" Clare asked, her teeth clicking together.

"You mean after you did your swan dive? Fowler lunged at me."

"Were you the one who—"

"No. My gun was still holstered. Mark was my backup. He's a good shot." He shook his head. "Fowler went between the ties." He looked at her, his eyes so deep she thought she could dive in and touch the bottom of him.

"I'm so sorry," she said.

"For Fowler or for Mark?" He raised a hand. "No, don't tell me. I know. For both of them." He took off his glasses and wiped them on a corner of the blanket. "When I saw you go over the edge like that . . ." He threw his arm around Clare and pulled her blanket-wrapped form tightly to his side. "Dammit, Clare, do you have any

idea how fast you can die in water that cold? We had a diver standing by, for heaven's sake."

"I didn't know it was going to be that cold," she said. She jerked her chin toward the squalling baby. "It was worth it."

He nodded. "Yeah, I guess it was." He smiled a bit. Then he started to laugh softly.

"What?"

"Damn, I sure had you pegged when I said you jumped in feet-first without thinking."

AT TWILIGHT the small parking area behind St. Alban's was already filled. Well, he should have expected that on Christmas Eve. Russ parked in the lot across the street, collected his package, and trudged across Elm toward the Gothic double door hung with wreaths. Inside the church, the smell of pine and beeswax filled the shadowy air. From the choir stalls a soloist was singing, then stopping, going back, and repeating her phrase.

"Hey, Chief Van Alstyne."

A startlingly well-scrubbed Kristen McWhorter faced him, carrying a box of tall white candles.

"Kristen. Hi. I'm surprised to see you here."

She jiggled the box. "Reverend Clare talked me into helping with the decorating. I'm sprigging the candles. Don't ask."

He grinned. "Okay. How is everything?"

"Pretty good. The funerals were hard. But knowing what happened to her helped. I still haven't spoken with Wes Fowler, but I have been seeing Cody." She smiled. "The Burnses have asked me to be a godmother. He's going to be baptized here in January."

"I'm glad for you." He glanced around. "Where's the Reverend?"

"I heard her muttering about coffee. Check her office."

The hallway was dim and quiet. He knocked on her doorframe. "Anyone in?"

"Russ! Isn't this a nice surprise." Clare rose, elegant in a tailored black blouse and long skirt. "Let me get you a cup of coffee." She poured from her thermos into a Virginia Seminary mug. The cof-

fee was hot and sweet and tasted of cinnamon. He dropped his package on the love seat and laid his parka over it before sitting down.

"I meant to call when I saw the notice about Fowler's funeral in the paper."

"I didn't officiate. I thought my presence would be more of a hurt than a help." She looked into her coffee. "I can't help but think that if I'd been a little more on the ball—"

"You could have stopped Fowler from destroying himself? Someone once told me you can't take responsibility for everyone around you. Seems like a pretty smart observation."

She smiled. "I should have had you put in a good word for me when the vestry called me on the carpet to explain what had been going on. I don't know who shocked them more, me or Vaughn Fowler."

He slipped off his glasses and polished them on his scarf. "If you need me to let them know what a help you were—"

"No, no. They just need time to adjust. I'm taking advantage of the confusion to push forward my young mothers' mentoring program. For which, by the way, I have the support of the Burnses, who have forgiven me for narcing on Geoff's drunk-driving episode."

"Let me get my glasses back on. Whenever I think about Geoff as a father, I get a headache." He pulled the package from beneath his coat. "I'm really here to give you this. Happy holidays."

"For me?" She tore into the paper eagerly. "Oh, Russ." She started laughing. "Thank you. They're just what I needed." She held up the waterproof insulated boots. "How did you know?"

He laughed. "Lucky guess?"

"I love them." She dropped them into the box. "I'm so glad you came." The last light of the sunset was flooding the room from windows and mirrors. Her hair, caught up in a twist, had already come loose, strands the color of gingerbread and fire floating around her face. "I've really missed having you to talk with." Her words hung in the air.

"Me, too." There was a long pause. Suddenly he had a lung-

constricting conviction that coming here had been a mistake, that he had to leave right away. "I ought to be going."

"Oh." She placed her coffee mug on the desk. "Of course." They both stood. She smiled brightly. "Merry Christmas, Russ."

He pulled her to him without conscious thought, and she came, settling against him, their arms wrapped around each other. He held her pressed tightly against his heart. "Merry Christmas," he said into her hair. It smelled of beeswax and cinnamon.

She looked up at him. Her eyes were very large.

"Clare," he said.

She shook her head. "No."

He touched her face. She closed her eyes for a moment, pressed her cheek into his palm. Then she stepped backward, breaking his hold. He reached for her. She threw up both hands, a barricade against him. "Leave. Now. Go home to your wife."

He let his hands drop, heavy and useless. "I wouldn't—"

"Yes, you would. And God help me, so would I. Go. Please."

He nodded, turned, walked away through the dim hall, through the haunting voice of the soloist singing, "*Earth stood hard as iron, / water like a stone; /snow had fallen, snow on snow, / snow on snow, in the bleak midwinter, / long ago.*"

Around the square, the remaining shops were closing, employees chattering down the sidewalks, last-minute shoppers slipping and sliding under the weight of bags and boxes. The fuzzy candy canes and reindeer, the fat lightbulbs, everything the same as it always was, as it always had been. Everything the same. Everything different. Everything.

He climbed into his truck and headed home.

Julia Spencer-Fleming grew up as an "army brat" and thus spent much of her childhood on the move. One place she could feel settled, however, was at her grandparents' home in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, where on visits she would "spend hours stretched out on the sofa with a stack of books reaching from the floor to the coffee table."

Today she lives with her husband and three young children in a 180-year-old farmhouse outside Portland, Maine—where the winters are only slightly less harsh than those depicted in *In the Bleak Midwinter*. A former attorney, Spencer-Fleming studied acting and history at Ithaca College. She was especially fond of Shakespeare and musical theater, but ultimately found writing more satisfying than acting: "I get to play all the characters and direct as well!"

Though Spencer-Fleming has always loved the hymn *In the Bleak Midwinter, The Holly and the Ivy* is actually her Christmas-time favorite. "But that just didn't sound very menacing," she explains. Her second book is also named after a hymn, and will feature the Reverend Clare Fergusson driving a brand-new Shelby Cobra. "I'm using the series to indulge my fantasy sports car life," Spencer-Fleming says. "I think in the next book Clare will get a Corvette."

"I get to play all the characters and direct as well!"

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